イラスト / 真早

My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister Seem to Have Gone out into the World, so What do I do…I Have Bigger Problems This Time Though

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Chapter 0

[confidential] Concerning a Virus Known as Weather Report [storage A51]

This is a cyber-attack alert.

The hacker known as Maiden is active primarily within North American and Western European countries. The same individual or organization is thought to be classified as a “noble hacker” or “security tester” who uses their harmless virus, Weather Report, to spread an infection deep within the strict systems of governments and corporations, but we cannot predict when they will show their true colors and instead spread harmful ransomware or corporate blackmail.

This notification is addressed to everyone.

Change your passwords regularly, do not open suspicious email attachments, and be on the lookout for the telltale signs of spear phishing.

Also, both the CIA and NSA are tracking down Maiden, but we intend to deepen our cooperative relationship with the CIA. Keep that in mind when any disclosure of information requests arrive.

Chapter 0

“Hi, Truth. The days when you had to hole up in a dark room just because you’re a hacker are over. You should grab a smartphone or tablet and get some sun.”

I, Amatsu Satori, was sitting in a bedside chair as an awfully cheerful girl spoke to me over my smartphone.

The video blurred a lot, presumably because the footage was taken from the view of the pet robot sitting on her table. I was pretty sure that toy let you attach a handheld game system as the small dog’s head to handle its processing. Thanks to that, the focal point kept swinging all over the place and refused to settle down.

“Um, Anastasia?”

“It’s Maiden. Use my handle name.”

“Maiden. How old are you this year again? 10?”

“11! That’s completely different!”

The small girl on the screen wore a bewitching red camisole with a miniskirt as short as tennis wear and she also seemed to be angry. Annoyingly enough, the entire ensemble was silk.

Anyway, she seemed to be at an outdoor café, but…Americans really were something else. Urp. My stomach was close to raising the white flag after just looking at the mountain of fries and fried shrimp.

“So why is an 11-year-old hanging around Las Vegas on a weekday? Don’t you have school? Or is this just your country being as insane as ever?”

“Don’t give me that look after seeing just one measly pound of fries. And have you forgotten? This is the States where we say ‘freedom’ but mean ‘crazy’. Let the delightful sun wash over you and you’ll realize this is the best way to live your life. Why would I want to sit in an air-conditioned lecture room when I could be relaxing at a café and poking at the vulnerabilities in bank systems?”

…If she would keep her mouth shut, you might think she was a doll or a princess. She had almost transparently white skin, her long hair was a very light platinum blonde, and she had an Eastern European slenderness that…yes, it made her more “pretty” than “cute” even at only 11. But as soon as she did open her mouth, it was this.

Oh, and she used a very feminine form of Japanese, so she probably learned the language from manga since English doesn’t have male and female language.

“Um, Anastasia?”

“It’s Maiden! And I’m not listening to any lectures. All I’m doing is leaving a harmless test virus in the middle of the system as a kiiiind warning telling them to update their security. I am a righteous! White!! Hacker!!! The problem is with the government for using systems that can be penetrated by an individual hacker like me. I’ve even gotten into the control rod of a nuclear reactor and the military’s space division. Listen, I even got as far as Phase 2 in a Texas missile silo! If it wasn’t for the old-fashioned manual key, I could have launched it. If it had been a stealth bomber, I could have opened the bomb bay and dropped the payload. Heh hehhh!!”

She seemed to be happy, but did she keep going on and on about it because she felt guilty?

“Calling yourself a white hacker could be seen as racist, so be careful. I could see someone asking what that implied about a

Hispanic hacker.”

She was a genius girl who had skipped grades to enter a certain Massachusetts university at her age. That land of the stars and stripes was a scary place because every classroom seemed to have one or two people who felt more like characters from a drama than real people.

Surprisingly, I had met this eccentric girl through online mahjong. I had been letting my disaster environment simulator named Maxwell play the game as a kind of benchmark test, but she saw through it right away. She said, “Chess and Reversi are one thing, but getting a program to play mahjong this well is impressive. What lab is this competition machine from?”

I had no way of knowing it at the time, but American researchers had been going all out to get machines to defeat all of the human masters of various board games. When Anastasia saw Maxwell “discarding tiles in a very lifelike and almost human way”, it had stimulated her curiosity.

By the way, Maxwell had not spoken for a while.

The reason why was obvious: If Maxwell said anything, Anastasia would start asking an endless stream of questions. Only counting the ones that came with an “official” announcement in advance, she had made 65 cyber attacks on us. She always claimed it was only to fulfill her academic curiosity in the field of data processing.

“Maiden. What if a third party finds your harmless virus and maliciously modifies it? That could lead to remote-control malware and ransomware that get in through the same route.”

“Uuh. I-if that happens, I’ll find the shameless bastard who stole my specialty and make them regret it. And if that leads to any false accusations, I’ll anonymously save anyone who was used as a

stepping stone. No problem, see! Grr, grr!!”

And then the methods she used to take revenge and save people would be copied to give the other person more cards to play…but she’d just throw a fit if I said that. And I couldn’t deny that Maxwell’s firewall was being improved by this tiny hacker’s attempts.

“But anyway, they’re all completely insane,” said Anastasia. “The military, the power plants, the germ labs…everyone. Even if their main servers are fine, do you know what kind of terminals the workers use? They like to smugly call themselves experts, but they’re just carrying around normal bioroids inside fancy cases. Just because their corporate reception desk has a contract with a security company, they think their systems are impenetrable. And yet they’re no safer than you curled up at home watching porn on your tablet!!”

That said, she would never shut up if you directly thanked her either. I needed to approach from a different angle for this.

“Maiden. If you really want to call yourself a pro hacker, shouldn’t you stop revealing all this internal information to an outsider like me?”

“Hold on, master! That’s going too far!”

“I’m not your master! Stop calling me that!”

“But aren’t you the monster who single-handedly destroyed *the* Bright Cross!? And there was no money or fame involved; you were only fighting to free the weakened Archenemies. There’s no more perfect white hacker. Here in the States, people are saying that becoming Master Truth’s apprentice turns you into a hero who wields a glowing sword and destroys a space empire!”

“P-please no! I don’t need all that extra pressure…!”

“No matter what you think, Truth, you’re the all anyone’s talking about in our field. Do you have any idea how disappointing it would be to hear you’re not one of us!?”

This was bad.

I had no idea that was how people saw me.

“Then, um, does that mean what I think it does?”

“Yes. Some reckless but ambitious challenger might come knocking at any time. Hackers are like mountain climbers: when we see a towering wall, we want to climb to the top.”

Was she serious?

As long as I could make a detailed simulation of the Class Rep swimsuit dance file set, I had no further interest in the cyber field.

“Can’t you keep all that dangerous nonsense to yourselves? Why do crackers insist on getting outsiders involved?”

“Hackers!! We are solitary technicians!! Truth, you aren’t intentionally provoking me, are you!? Well, if you want a fight, just name the conditions! Choose a casino and we’ll see who can break through its defenses first!!”

“Okay, okay! You’re a genius, you’re a genius!”

Sheesh, before even talking about online security, she was shouting all this information in public. And in an open café no less. Even if she was just a kid and speaking to a handheld game system used as a head for a pet robot, were the other customers really that indifferent?

“Anyway, Truth, how about you get out more? The two of us can change the popular image of the pasty indoor hacker.”

“Sorry, but I’m not about to leave this air-conditioned room. Besides, the Class Rep is feeling sick for once, so I have to look after her.”

“Hmm. Biological bodies are such a pain. The cells are managed by a program, but we can’t control them properly because they use a different language. …Hm?”

Anastasia looked off to the side.

And that profile view froze in place.

She had stopped moving while looking at something.

“Hey, Maiden?”

I briefly panicked, thinking a police officer was questioning her.

But that wasn’t it.

Her widened eyes contained a purer and hopelessly uncontrollable fear.

“What…is that?”

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?”

I hated how cheap and generic I sounded. But the human mind refused to work with much flexibility when it really mattered.

And I heard something through the smartphone.

Cars honked and metal bent. Young men and women screamed and shouted. Something cut across the screen behind Anastasia. I had

no idea what it had been originally, but it looked like a thick metal pipe that had been horribly mangled. And what else was that flying by? There were bagels, paper coffee cups, takeout bags, and lots of other odds and ends.

“Hey, Maiden, Anastasia! Listen!!”

“Eh? O-ohh.”

“Was it a traffic accident? An explosion??? No, you can explain later. Just keep your head low! Hide under the table!! You live in America, so you’re used to that, aren’t you!?”

It sounded like something from another world or from a movie, but this 11-year-old girl was all alone in Las Vegas, which meant she was on the front line of that gun culture. Things that seemed entirely bizarre in Japan could easily happen there.

But Anastasia herself seemed almost absentminded. She stayed in her chair, kept her head turned, and did not even try to move.

“Sorry, Truth…”

“For what!? Why are you apologizing!?”

“This has gone beyond a mere accident or crime. How am I even supposed to explain this?”

?

I couldn’t figure out what she was trying to say. She kept looking back and forth between something outside the screen and the lens of the handheld game system attached to the pet robot. She seemed unsure if she should show me what was happening before her eyes…

“Maiden, what is happening there?”

“…”

“Tell me, Maiden! Please!”

I could see her small lips trembling a bit in that profile view.

She seemed to be telling me not to regret this.

Then the camera blurred. She artlessly aimed it toward what she could see.

And my smartphone’s screen was filled with…translucent red slime.

The nightmarish vision showed that slime enveloping and digesting more and more passersby.

What was happening?

“They’re gels…” said Anastasia.

Even with this placed before my eyes, I wasn’t sure what to say. But these were definitely real deaths occurring there.

“Are they Archenemies?” she asked. “Regardless, these red gel monsters are eating people…”

Were they sulfuric acid? Hydrochloric acid? Nitric acid? Or something rarer like aqua regia or hydrofluoric acid???

They were about the size of a puddle that you would need a running start to jump over. Was it even possible to make a human body dissolve that cleanly if you dumped a bucket of highly-concentrated acid on them? Even those XL-sized Americans were gone in less than twenty seconds! Not even their hair or bones remained!

And being dissolved by acid while alive was too bizarre a way to

die. What kind of life would you have to live to meet a fate like that?

But.

Even so.

There wasn't time to avoid the reality on my smartphone screen. In a distant Vegas café, red slimes large enough to swallow adults whole were crawling around and doing more and more damage. At this rate, Anastasia would be surrounded and lose any chance of escaping.

And then I would have to see an 11-year-old girl dissolved until not even her bones remained.

"A-Anastasia."

"It's…Maiden. Wh-what is it?"

I breathed in and out.

At the moment, my smartphone could act as a weapon to help her cross that battlefield.

It would help her escape those unidentified Archenemy Gels.

It would help me protect this distant friend.

"Maxwell and I will give you our full support. So make sure you get out of there alive!!"

[confidential] Concerning Las Vegas [storage A51]

An important tourist resource in Nevada and a world-renowned casino and theatre city. Access via land routes is possible, but as it is surrounded by a harsh natural desert, most people rely on McCarran International Airport.

The guest population is estimated at about four million.

Development is primarily focused on the main street which is lovingly known as the Strip. Development is especially fierce and land prices especially high at the intersections known as the Four Corners and the New Four Corners.

Given its location, personnel at this air base frequently visit the city, so we must be careful to avoid accidents or information leaks while intoxicated. We must be especially concerned about soldiers' interactions with moneylenders or prostitutes.

All personnel visiting the city must provide a detailed observation report and avoid carrying small spy tools like those seen in movies. Reports of casino security detaining them on suspicions of cheating sound silly, but it happens quite frequently. It will take even longer to ensure the release of anyone who is falsifying their identity, so keep that in mind.

Chapter 1

There was no point in scrambling around.

Even if I shot to my feet, threw the door open, and ran outside, I could never reach Anastasia when she was so far away. She would be caught and dissolved while waiting for me.

More importantly, was there anything I could realistically do right now?

I had to seriously consider that question inside this room.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“We’re going to find a way to support Anastasia. I need your help.”

“Understood.”

“Eh? What!? Is Maxwell-chan there!?”

Even in her situation, Anastasia’s eyes were sparkling, but something else was more important than her frightening mental fortitude.

“Anastasia, are you familiar with the surrounding geography?”

“I know the main street and the landmarks. I visit Vegas a few times a year.”

…That would be enough for enjoying yourself in a luxury car with a chauffeur, but to escape from deadly Archenemies, I wanted more

accuracy than a car's GPS. I wanted to know each and every alleyway in the network of roads.

Information was the greatest weapon.

You couldn't predict what would divide life from death. Even after hours of constant focus, a single momentary lapse could cost you everything, so I wanted to eliminate everything I could predict in advance.

"Maxwell. First, I want a map of Las Vegas and a way of checking on the spread of damage. That will change where we have Anastasia escape to."

At the most basic level, I wanted to know if this damage was affecting a single block of Las Vegas, the entire city, the entire state, or the entire country. How far those red gels had spread would change where the goal line was located.

"No, I am having difficulty accessing the civilian online map. It is possible the people of Las Vegas or people viewing the damage from outside have overloaded the system."

"Are you kidding!? Next best plan: check for past witness reports or legends related to these gels. Also check what's happening on social media and message boards. We don't have time for you to be idling."

I looked around the small room and faced the Class Rep who was lying on the bed in casual clothing.

"Class Rep, do you have a guidebook for Las Vegas somewhere? You love reading those, don't you? Y'know, checking the train schedule to make it feel like you're going on a trip."

"…Ugh…"

She nauseously held a hand to her forehead and groaned a bit, but she did point me in the right direction. I found a pocket-sized guidebook in the bedside table's drawer.

I unfolded the detailed poster-sized map inside the front cover. *Good, it has all the alleyways too. Yes!!*

I held my smartphone on its side and photographed the entire map.

"Maxwell, here's some data. Use image analysis to read in the map."

"Sure."

"I need to double check, Maiden! You're currently at the Shrimp Caesar's Café next to the Four Corners of the famous Strip, right? Known for its fried shrimp and butter lobster!?"

"Y-yes. But this is bad…"

Once again, Anastasia was hardly listening.

Had she seen something bad enough to distract her?

"They aren't alone… There are even more of them than before!"

"Can they multiply or split apart?"

"I don't know. Besides, I don't even know where the gels are coming from. They're each about the size of a puddle. You would need a veritable army of dedicated tanker trucks or vehicle gas tanks to sneak them into the city and it would look like they're suddenly multiplying if they were crawling out of the manholes or ditches."

Whatever the case, it wasn't a pleasant thing to contemplate, but that settled things for me.

“Maiden, you need to stay away from the more heavily populated areas. The walls of people will keep you from moving and you want a clear view of your surroundings since the gels can come at you from any direction. Let’s find you a route through a back alley.”

“A back alley? Where? Where’s the way out of here?”

“Run through that café and out the back door. Hurry!”

The camera footage blurred really badly. After grabbing as many fries as she could hold, she had apparently taken off running.

Her history was nothing like a normal 11-year-old’s, but those rough experiences at such a young age came in handy. I had most feared that she would panic, not listen to a thing I said, and just start crying, but it didn’t look like that was going to happen.

That said, you never knew what would take the lid off of someone’s emotions. Even an adult would piss themselves if they were about to die from being dissolved in acid. In that way, Anastasia really was tough.

“Anastasia, your clothes are silk, right?”

“Yes! This is the latest from Pucelle Blanche. Damn, I just realized I forgot to show it off on social media. So there’s no way I’m tearing it apart to use as a bandage like in movies!!”

“No, I’m just glad it isn’t a synthetic fiber. Now I don’t have to worry if there’s a bit of fire.”

“Is that supposed to cheer me up? I’m not letting a single speck of cigarette ash get on this!!”

Incidentally, there was no one in the café.

The employees had either fled out the back door or evacuated to

the office in the back.

Anastasia moved past the register and entered the hallway behind it.

“I need to…um…oh, there are so many doors!”

“Maiden, look for the emergency exit sign. That will tell you which door leads outside.”

“There it is!”

She practically tackled the stainless steel door open.

The atmosphere was entirely different from the main street and all its brightly-lit signs. A rundown back alley in a gun culture was somewhere I would normally want to avoid at all costs, but at the moment, it was the spider thread needed to escape hell.

The alley extended to the right and left.

I began wondering which way was safer for Anastasia, but then…

Bang!! Bang bang bang!!

I ducked down just as much as Anastasia who was actually there.

And I yelled into my smartphone.

“Don’t go left! Go away from the gunfire! Head to the right!”

“Got it, Truth!”

The footage was unavoidably blurry while she ran, which made detailed analysis difficult.

So I didn’t initially understand why she had come to a stop.

“What is it, Maid-…”

“This is bad.”

That was enough.

I heard a horribly wet and sticky sound from further down the narrow alley.

It was the gels.

They’d already made it into those narrow paths!?

…But if Anastasia turned back, she would be running right into a deluge of gunfire. The slimes were frightening, but so were panicked and gun-wielding humans.

“Maxwell, analyze the footage.”

“You will need to make a more specific request.”

“Check through the past footage for an emergency staircase in the alley!”

“Sure. There is a metal emergency staircase on a building’s outer wall thirty meters back. I can estimate the building is twelve stories tall.”

“Maiden, turn back. Go thirty meters.”

“Meters!? How much is that in feet!?”

“Just run until you see a staircase!!”

Even I was frantic by this point.

Anastasia turned her back on what sounded like mud being

kneaded and she took off running again. I could have sworn the sticky sound grew louder. Almost like it was chasing after her.

…Does that mean they're intelligent?

"Is this the staircase?"

Anastasia climbed up a metal staircase located partway down the alley.

"How far up should I go?"

"To the roof!"

"Seriously? I'm a hacker, you know!?"

"Isn't the age of holing up in dark rooms over? I'll massage your lovely legs as much as you want later, so just get running!"

"Truth, isn't that more of a reward for you!?"

I couldn't remember what the average stamina of an 11-year-old was, but could she make it to the 12th floor? I just hoped she didn't get a cramp or pull a leg muscle before getting to the roof.

"Pant, pant."

She started breathing heavily, but even that sounded cute. Being a girl was cheating.

"Truth, pant, this might not be the time, but I'm thankful."

"For what?"

"If I'd been alone, I know I would have screwed up right at the start. My hips would have gone limp and I couldn't have gotten out of my chair. Even if it's through a remote connection, it means a lot

to have someone with you.”

…

“Pant, pant. I made it. I’m on the roof! What do I do now?”

Anastasia stood on the roof, held up the pet robot that had her handheld game system for a head, and spun around in a circle to film everything. That told me the situation.

There was a row of industrial air conditioning units and a few satellite antennae. There didn’t seem to be a heliport. I also saw the back of a giant electronic sign that faced the main road.

“The gels might crawl up to there.”

“Huh!? Then I’m trapped!”

“That’s why you need to move to the next building!!”

We were in luck.

“Those air conditioning units are pretty big. Maiden, they’re taller than you. Use a coin or some kind of tool to unscrew the side panel. Once you have that long piece of metal, you can use it as a bridge between buildings. Do that and you can escape the gels! They generally just crawl along the ground or floor and only hop up in order to attack people!! A running start is useless given how slow they move. They shouldn’t be able to make any major jumps!!”

“Y-you’re kidding, right? Do you have any idea how high up I am!? If I fall, I’m dead!”

“Then are you going to stay there? Crying isn’t going to change anything once they catch up. So hurry!”

Anastasia spat out a curse and, annoyingly enough, pulled out an

authentic Swiss Army knife. I could barely stand to watch the painstaking process of her small and trembling hands removing one screw at a time. Those red slimes could appear from the staircase at any moment.

“There, it’s off!”

“The gap to the east is the narrowest, so go that way.”

“Which way is east!?”

“Oh, honestly. It’s to your left, Maiden.”

The video’s viewpoint lowered, but not because she had dropped the game system. It was at a stable position just off the floor.

“Maiden, how about you pull the mobile off of that pet robot’s neck?”

“What, this thing was made in Japan, you know? Both the 3D game system and the dog robot it plugs into.”

It must have had some simple sensor control and image processing because the camera followed Anastasia as she grabbed the long panel and walked awkwardly along. …I didn’t want to say anything since it was an emergency, but her all-silk luxury outfit had a miniskirt as short as tennis wear, which was a very poor match with this low angle.

“Is this really where I have to cross?”

“Maiden, don’t look down.”

“Now you’re just trying to make me look!!”

At a corner of the roof, she let the long metal panel fall over past the edge so the other end reached the neighboring building which

was the same height. The gap was only about three meters, but she was on the roof. That made a world of difference.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me, dammit…”

Anastasia grabbed the unsteady pet robot. She apparently intended to crawl across.

Even the small girl’s weight made the panel creak below her. There was nothing reassuring about the situation. The panel could bend in half and dump her to the ground at any time.

Meanwhile, I heard more gunshots.

“Wow…”

On all fours, Anastasia stopped at the midway point and aimed the pet robot’s face toward the ground.

The alley she was crossing was normal enough, but the main road was a lot wider than what I was used to in Japan.

The road was as straight as a runway and lined with palm trees, but it was in a horrific state.

It wasn’t just five or ten of them.

The red gels were entering and exiting manholes all over the place, crawling along the ground, clinging to walls, and attacking people.

“…I wonder where they came from.”

“And what the hell are they?”

A red slime was even crawling out of a police car’s open door. The gels were all over the inside and outside of the various shops. Since they weren’t dissolving the cars or walls…did that mean they didn’t

like the taste of metal or synthetic fibers? As for the humans, all of them seemed to be pulling out handguns and firing: from the muscular police officers to the round and fat housewives. Anastasia really couldn't travel on the surface. Not only were the gels there, but there were simply too many bullets flying around.

And when those many bullets hit the translucent red slimes, they twisted around a bit and retreated.

"It's working…?"

"Don't be silly," said Anastasia. "Those gels have no blood vessels or organs, so how are we supposed to measure damage to them?"

As she watched on, the slimes regained their momentum and leaped at the gun-wielding people.

My spine tingled with a different sort of fear than seeing someone's head chopped off or crushed.

"Are you serious…?" groaned Anastasia. "There have to be a lot of soldiers here from the Nevada air base, but that's still not enough?"

Meanwhile, in my room:

"User, something has caught my attention."

"What is it, Maxwell?"

"Based on the footage of the surface, the gels are not approaching any of the vehicles or buildings which are on fire."

"Well, I guess they are living creatures. Albeit bizarre ones."

"Sure. In that case, would that explain why they flinched back from the bullets?"

“…So it wasn’t the bullets themselves but the frictional heat?”

I wanted to know the exact heat threshold for Anastasia’s sake, but there wasn’t time to perform numerous verification tests.

“Las Vegas is a desert city, right? So can they handle heated asphalt?”

“No. Based on their movements, they are most active while in the shadows of buildings. And when in direct sunlight, they are mostly traveling through the damp areas in the roadside flower beds and sprinkler-wet grass.”

But that was far from enough sample data, so we didn’t have an answer worth risking one’s life on. It was best to leave it at “they’re weak to fire” for now.

“Also, they are actively targeting the people who are firing guns.”

This time, the observation came from Anastasia.

“Come to think of it, it was the same at the beginning. They first attacked the loud cars and the adults who were screaming. Does that mean I only survived because I was left in a daze for so long?”

“It sounds like the gels aren’t all that intelligent. Do they just react to loud noises? So it’s more about their ears than eyes.”

“They might be detecting the minute vibrations passing along their liquid surfaces.”

I thought for a bit.

“Maxwell. Are there any phones left from the people attacked on the surface? If they’re still usable, use the GPS signal to determine their numbers. Start calling the phones furthest away from any survivors.”

“Sure. However…”

“I know. You can’t save them all. But that’s out of our control!”

Empty melodies began playing all over.

But the result was an unexpected one.

“No response.”

“Is the volume too low? Maxwell, cause a short in the phones’ lithium ion batteries to trigger an explosion!!”

“Sure.”

Blasts that sounded like smaller gunshots shook the air. The gels were preparing to attack the terrified people who had been driven up against a wall, but they actually changed direction this time. They left the living targets and instead attacked the remnants of the phones.

“Oh, so it really was about the volume,” said Anastasia.

“Maxwell, some of the gels reacted more than others. Can you figure out why?”

“The margin of error is high with so little sample data, but I suspect they are reacting to the pressure of the air more than the sound or vibration.”

“The air?”

“More specifically, the force of the moisture, dust, and other particles in the air being pushed at them. The gels may use the particles that dissolve into their surface to read the movement of the air and predict the presence of a target.”

“…I guess that makes the most sense.”

After all, they were gels with no apparent eyes or ears. All we could see was their ability to digest things, so it may have been best to assume they sensed things by dissolving something and acquiring data from it.

“Maxwell, are there any electronic signs and LCD screens still functioning? Light them up.”

“Sure. …No response. They seem to have a weak or nonexistent ability to perceive light.”

…I had thought their translucent red bodies could act like an eyeball’s lens if they bent themselves to bend the light, but it didn’t seem that was the case.

“Okay, Maxwell. Let’s go with your theory. They’re dissolving the particles in the air to sense things. If we know that, we can take advantage of it.”

“This sounds like a job for a righteous hacker,” said Anastasia. “But isn’t this really scary? Just detonate a target’s phone and the gels will all attack them. That’s more dangerous than a cyber attack on a self-driving car.”

Taking some time to think seemed to have paid off. At some point, Anastasia had finished crossing the bridge.

After breathing a sigh of relief, she looked back and then tensed up.

The Archenemies had already arrived on the roof of the building she had started on.

“Anastasia, pull the bridge onto your side! There’s no point if they can cross to your building!”

“Kh.”

She quickly pulled the metal panel over with both hands. And she resumed carrying it.

The gels picked up speed and approached, but then they fell into the gap between buildings.

“Th-that was close. …But this seems to be working.”

“This was only so complicated because we’d never seen Archenemies like this before. We can just think of them like a group of army ants. The gels can get in through any kind of gap and they can eat any living creature, but they’re weak to fire and can’t cross canyons or rivers. Once you know their traits, there’s nothing to fear.”

“I-I see. That’s Truth for you!”

“No,” interrupted Maxwell. “When army ants gather, they can create a bridge from their own bodies and the entire group can cross a river. Since we have seen a similarly large group of gels, crossing between buildings is not enough to relax. You must keep your guard up.”

“Kh. Anastasia, you know what you have to do, right? Then keep it up. You can’t relax your guard even after losing them, so just get out of there as quickly as possible.”

“…wha-..n’t hear…Tru…you say?”

“Hey, what’s happening, Maxwell?”

“There is an issue with the signal. Either the base station was destroyed or restrictions were set in place to prevent the lines from overloading during the emergency.”

“Oh, hell! Can you hear me, Anastasia!?”

“Ksshh, kssshhh!”

No good, dammit!

“Maxwell, can you overwrite our packets to include the emergency code used by the police and fire department?”

“Sure. I will try, but I cannot guarantee anything.”

“That’s fine. Just do it!”

Anastasia had learned how to “run away”, so I could only hope she was continuing to move from rooftop to rooftop instead of just standing there.

After a minute, the wait felt unbelievably long.

After ten minutes, I could hardly breathe!

After thirty minutes, I was certain the world was ending!!

“Maxwell, are you still not done!?”

“Sure. The connection has been restored.”

“Anastasia!”

Where was she?

The view from the pet robot she held showed she was now inside a building instead of on a rooftop.

I could hear her muttering something through the screen.

“1207, 1207.”

"…Hm? Wait, Maiden! Don't tell me…!"

As soon as I said that, I heard a loud bang as the door to my room, Room 1207, was kicked open from outside.

A small girl with very light platinum blonde hair walked in. It was the 11-year-old college student hacker who wore a toxically red camisole with a miniskirt as short as tennis wear.

The all-silk girl held a pet robot with a portable game system for a head and she still had a triumphant smile on her lips despite how exhausted she looked.

"Anastasia!?"

"Hi, Truth. Sorry it had to turn out like this, but I'll say it anyway: Welcome to Vegas. Will that jetlagged girl be able to move?"

[confidential] Excerpt from a Special Report in Monthly Nu [storage A51]

If you only want a piece as big as the end of your little finger, meteorites from space can be easily bought from a meteorite hunter or one of the shops they frequent. So what kind of stone do the informed choose?

You can always go for the rare metals and rare earths, but it's gotta be limestone if you're looking for some romance. Especially one with small holes through it like a sponge. Those are everywhere, you say? Can you still say that if you know that's material evidence of extraterrestrial life?

There are a few celestial bodies suspected to have water or oxygen,

but if those planets and moons have active microbes, it's only natural the rock will be harmed. And limestone reacts to acid in a way that easily leaves behind tunnels.

Of course, the odds are incredibly low that this life would have the intelligence for verbal interaction or the friendliness to want to hold a peaceful conversation.

But when you have that companion for your late-night astronomical observations, it almost feels like that life is with you while you sit there waiting.

Classification: C

Increase observation just in case.

Chapter 2

Let's all work together to create Director John Knocker's next film! We are in need of some cheerful extras who can film with us in Vegas!!

Simply put, that was the reason we had left Japan and traveled halfway around the world to Las Vegas.

We had won an online drawing.

It seemed the reason for this was threefold: they wanted a lot of Asian extras, they were using the extras as a way of providing a bonus for fans, and John Knocker was impressed with Kukyou City's focus on disaster prevention after losing a villa during a giant hurricane the year before.

"…Sorry, Maiden."

"Hm? For what?"

"For not leaving this hotel room even though I was in Las Vegas. Saying I couldn't leave the Class Rep or that we might miss each other out there is only an excuse. The fact remains that I didn't do anything."

"Don't be silly. What could you have done if you did head out there? What would your destination have been? You don't even know how to fight those gels. Getting all justice-y for no reason would only increase the risk of getting eaten. In fact, you did well to restrain yourself with all that going on. It's because of that that we

managed to meet like this."

I wasn't sure what to say.

I wasn't used to being a target of anger. But I also couldn't figure out how to react when a friend smiled and forgave me in a situation like this.

"Sure. This would be my user's fault for being an unfortunate sort of person who prefers for girls to look down on him and insult him. But if you leave it like this, a new world might open up for him."

"Oh, it's Maxwell-chan! Hey, hey, can I connect via Redtooth? I found a new vulnerability in a Pearphone's wireless keyboard authentication."

"No. Most definitely no. Please do not view me like a fish needing gutting."

"You sure are shy for a program. Hey, Truth, did she become a gloomy *kokeshi*-haired *Yamato Nadeshiko* because of your Japanese coding style?"

"No. I would prefer you said I have a flexible and delicate processing architecture that cannot be imitated by a boisterous American cheerleader of a supercomputer whose every piece of clothing – down to the underwear – bears the stars and stripes."

"Here in the States, a container-sized machine is treated like a baby-faced and underdeveloped little girl."

Maxwell's interruption gave me the time I needed to sort through my feelings.

…*Okay.*

"Hey, underdeveloped little girl. The real one, I mean."

“That hurts, you know!? But what is it, Truth? …Stop patting my head!!”

“The connection cut out for a while, so I want to know what happened. What are the gels up to? Have they gotten into this hotel yet?”

“I don’t know. And how about we come up with a proper name for them? I think I lost them while moving from roof to roof, but we can’t stop the fallen gels from getting in through the hotel’s entrance. …Hey, how long are you going to keep patting my head? You are just incorrigible, Truth.”

For all her complaining, she didn’t try to fight it. It made me think of a prideful white cat purring as you rubbed her chin.

“So the question is what to do now. But…”

“Yeah.” Anastasia honestly nodded at what I said. “Look out the window, Truth. It looks pretty bad out there. Everything from family cars to shuttle buses are toppled over and spewing smoke. You couldn’t even get a round light car through there now. And Vegas is right smack in the middle of the desert, so you can’t reach the next city without a car.”

“Not to mention that we can’t drive.”

“No. I can take over if you find a program-controlled self-driving car.”

“You? Driving? When communication trouble could cut off the signal at any moment? I don’t think so, Maxwell.”

“But then what *do* we do, Truth?”

Just as Anastasia pouted her lips, I heard a loud noise from overhead. It reminded me of a sheet snapping at the air.

Anastasia's head shot up to view the ceiling. No, she was focused on something even higher than that: the rooftop.

"Hey, is that a helicopter!?"

"You're the one from the aircraft nation. When traveling from one end of the country to the other, you use passenger planes instead of bullet trains or linear motor trains. Although that's what lets my nation stay at the leading edge of train tech."

Meaning…

"If the land routes are backed up, they'll send rescue teams in from the air. The exit we need is right above us, not to the east, west, north, or south. So instead of wandering around, it would be best to stay put in a solid building with a heliport."

"Of course, they will assume you were wiped out and pass you by if they cannot see you from the air, so it would be best to aim a television remote out the window and set it up to flash on and off at an irregular rate."

"Yeah, if we used a normal flashlight, we could get ourselves wiped out if those things end up being attracted to light after all."

"No. Most animals and insects can distinguish between infrared and ultraviolet, so I doubt that countermeasure would be much use."

That meant we couldn't leave this place.

I wanted to at least get the jetlagged Forehead Glasses Class Rep on a helicopter. The gels were all moving independently at the moment, but if they gathered together like army ants, then they might be able to form a bridge to directly cross between buildings. That was why it was better to stay inside a room near the rooftop

instead of the exposed rooftop itself.

Of course.

No matter how much we discussed the odds and possibilities, we were doomed if no helicopter showed up. That was why I hadn't originally wanted to guide Anastasia here.

It was to keep her safe and feel more certain she would be rescued.

I had thought I would find her more quickly if I could search for her from the sky where the gels couldn't reach us. The main rotor's wind might have been able to draw the gels away while she was guided to safety.

But that didn't change the fact that I had waited before doing anything for Anastasia. Instead of instantly running out of that hotel room, I had calmly stayed put. I had stopped myself.

"Ha ha."

And yet that 11-year-old girl laughed innocently while I irresponsibly patted her head.

The look on her face was a lot like the unconstrained smile given to a family member.

"Wow! You really are incredible, Truth! What was your hometown called? Kukyou City? Does living there really change your outlook that much? Or is it your experience? I mean, you're the hero who crushed the Bright Cross! Every thought in your head must be so cool!!"

"…"

I couldn't find anything to say and merely narrowed my eyes, but then my smartphone screen flashed. Maxwell was drawing my

attention.

“User, you can lose yourself in sentimentality later. Now, I suggest you hurry to the roof. If there is no sign of life, the approaching rescue helicopter might leave without landing.”

“Yeah, that’s right. To the rooftop, then. Class Rep, c’mon, grab on…”

“Urrrgh.”

The graceful Class Rep groaned like a *kaiju* and wrapped her arms around my neck. This was hardly the time, but my heart was pounding like crazy. I mean, that scent, that softness, and that warmth! And her pulse! I could feel her pounding heart through her modest but impressive chest! And she was so weak that it felt like she would do anything I asked!!

Then I felt a mysterious strength wrap its arms around me from behind.

It was that troublesome girl Anastasia.

“No fair, Truth. I didn’t realize you were such a lady killer.”

“?”

“If you’ve already got a girlfriend, then you don’t need Maxwell-chan, right? You can hand control of her over to me, can’t you? C’mon.”

“No! Warning: She might be acting cute and hugging you, but I have detected a close-range wireless cyber attack. This is a serious threat!!”

Maxwell was actually using exclamation points for once. She hadn’t even done that when the Bright Cross’s Laplace was attacking her.

While sandwiched between the Class Rep in front and Anastasia behind, I wandered around the hotel room grabbing the important items like our passports and my wallet.

“Okay, let’s get to the rooftop heliport.”

“Do you have any snacks in here?”

“Weren’t you just eating enough fried food to give me heartburn just looking at it?”

With that exasperated comment, I tossed her a stick of Japanese gum that was sitting on the bedside table. She stared it from varying distances and angles with a frown on her face.

“…Sugarless and no added colors? This is a health food.”

“Gum is pretty much nothing but chemicals, so you’re about the only person who would call it that. Now let’s get going.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

I didn’t like leaving behind our suitcases, but we couldn’t exactly bring them with us. I just hoped we could collect them a week or a month later once the gel stuff had died down.

Anastasia tossed the gum into her mouth and we got moving with the sluggish Class Rep in tow.

I opened the door and, after a moment of hesitation, decided to bring the card key with me just in case. I couldn’t seem to rid myself of those normal habits.

The hallway was deserted.

The sound of the helicopter rotors had to be reverberating through the entire building, but was everyone else afraid to leave their

rooms?

“That would depend on how long they expect this to last,” said Maxwell. “If they predict the problem to be resolved in a matter of hours, it would indeed be safest to hole up in their room and wait for the storm to pass.”

“I can see why you wouldn’t want to head out into danger when there’s so much gunfire outside. But I feel like they’re completely screwed if their guess is wrong.”

“Sure. There is no absolute correct answer in a disaster environment. It is very rare that all the necessary hints are available to you. Even if you have some experience, you must ultimately make a gamble.”

Anastasia finally let go of my back and gave me a mischievous look.

“This might be more like horseracing or poker than roulette or a lottery. I’m glad I have such an excellent forecaster on my side.”

“…”

The helicopter only had so much space, so we would be in trouble if the entire hotel rushed for it. Still, I wasn’t sure we could leave it like this. I seriously doubted this would be over in a few hours.

Maxwell’s opinion was even harsher.

“Go ahead, user. But only if you are willing to take responsibility when everyone in the building tries to board the helicopter, fails to get on, and is wiped out. Otherwise, you should not interfere any further. It is best to let everyone’s decisions send them down different paths so that as many as possible can find a chance at survival.”

Perhaps so.

And I didn't have time to argue.

I could always think about the hotel guests once we were on the roof and had gotten the rescue chopper to stop. We were all done for if it passed us by.

"…I've really learned how to make cheap excuses to myself."

"Hm? What is it, Truth?"

Anastasia had trusted in me and arrived here on her own, so she seemed so very innocent and pure.

"User, I have received a video chat. It is from Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi's desktop."

"Okay, Maxwell. Put them through."

On my instruction, the smartphone screen changed. This was another function of the short-text SNS I used to communicate with Maxwell.

Two people were pressing their soft cheeks together to cram both their heads onto the screen: my vampire older sister, who had gorgeous blonde ringlet curls and sexy proportions, and my zombie little sister, who had black twintails with wrapped butter rolls at the end and slender proportions.

"Onii-chaaan."

"Oh, my. I had heard there was some trouble there…but it seems you really are in trouble. You already have two girls clinging to you."

Were those two all right?

The answer was obvious if I thought about it, but when I was

caught in a natural(?) disaster, it was easy to feel like the people I knew were also in a bind.

Anastasia was still trapped by her old “habits”, so she started toward the glass elevators before remembering it was an emergency and stopping.

At times like this, you had to use the stairs.

“Erika, perfect timing.”

“Fuguu!? What about me, Onii-chan!?”

“Satori-kun only does that to get your attention. Anyway, is there something you want to ask me?”

“Yes,” I replied. “There are red slimes crawling around and they can dissolve a human whole. But what are they? What kind of Archenemy are they?”

“I don’t know.”

I hadn’t expected that answer.

It was not often that my knowledgeable older sister tilted her head so cutely.

“Are you even sure they’re Archenemies?”

“Eh? Eh? But, I mean…aren’t gelatinous Archenemies really, really famous? More so than vampires and zombies even.”

“In RPG worlds, yes.” Ayumi puffed out her cheeks like a pufferfish while wearing sportswear that was as skimpy as a swimsuit. “Colorful slimes aren’t really a traditional fantasy creature. Aren’t they more like UFOs or cryptids? They aren’t based on any legend or religion.”

“Yes,” continued Erika. “Formless monsters are generally made of fire. Wind would be the next most common, I suppose. But formless monsters made of slime aren’t really seen in any legends or mythologies. Water monsters tend to be fish, frogs, or beautiful women.”

“Eh? …Then what in the world are these things?”

I felt something cold and heavy in my stomach as I threw open the metal door to the emergency stairs. Using a familiar word to describe the unknown was something like a defensive reaction. Kind of like how I compared them to army ants. By reaching an understanding like that, you could push the fear away.

But my sisters’ words brought it all back. The fear of Unknown Creature X pushed in at me from all sides.

However…

“Can’t you just call them gels?” asked Erika.

“Eh? Ah? What???”

“I’m just saying to call them gels as a sort of placeholder until you know what they really are. Because just calling them X would be confusing.”

“Onii-chan, I say you can call them the wrong name if it’ll keep you from mentally restraining yourself for no reason.”

Was that how it worked?

Maybe so.

“…We’re there, Truth.” Anastasia tugged on my sleeve. “That’s the door to the roof.”

“Satori-kun, don’t do anything rash,” said Erika.

“I won’t.”

With that, I grabbed the knob to the thick metal door. It wasn’t locked. It may have been set up to automatically unlock in an emergency.

As soon as I opened the door, a gust of wind hit me in the face like a solid object. The Class Rep and Anastasia’s hair whipped behind them.

A complex arrangement of steel beams formed a giant’s table situated a step higher than the air conditioning units and electronic signs. That was the heliport.

And a short and fat helicopter with a rotor on the front and back was hovering between ten and fifteen meters above that table.

They must have been unsure there was anyone coming, but they couldn’t bring themselves to abandon anyone who might be there. And things set in motion as soon as we appeared on the roof.

A male voice shouted over a megaphone.

“…!! ———!?”

“Maxwell, you’re gonna have to translate that! You’ve seen my grades in English!”

“Really, Truth? There’s something wrong when you can write C++ code in English, but can’t hold a conversation.”

I silenced the exasperated 11-year-old with some head-pats while I waited, but Maxwell did not respond.

…?

“Warning.”

“What is it, Maxwell?”

“I have received some information from the personal websites of several civilian weather forecasters. A cloudburst has been detected in the desert 70km south of Las Vegas’s center.”

“So…so what? Who cares if it rains in the empty desert?”

“Ugh,” groaned the jetlagged Class Rep who was leaning against me from the side. “Rain in the desert…is a lot more dangerous…than you think.”

“Sure. When a large quantity of rain falls on a desert that has been heated to 50 or 60 degrees Celsius, it will produce a rapid change in air pressure and lead to a largescale downburst. Of course, the cause is more multifaceted than that and rain does not always produce a downburst.”

“Kilometers? Celsius? Why’d you have to teach Maxwell-chan such confusing units, Truth?”

“Because I believe in the metric system. Maxwell, sum it up for me. Why and how is this bad?”

“Sure,” began the simple response.

The rest of the message appeared on top of Erika and Ayumi’s faces.

“In the worst case, the entire Las Vegas city center will be engulfed in a sandstorm with ferocious speeds of several dozen meters per second.”

My eyes shot up from my smartphone.

Something rose like smoke from beyond the horizon. It was a thick wall that extended endlessly to the left and right like the Great Wall of China. And by the time I saw it, it was too late.

“Get out of here!!”

I shouted at the helicopter, but did my voice even reach them?

The large rescue chopper had seemed so solid and heroic, but now it flipped over like a submarine toy floating in the bath. It couldn’t even make an emergency landing on the hotel rooftop and disappeared toward the surface. It all happened in an instant, so it had no chance to recover.

And we didn’t have time to sit around and watch it happen.

All of a sudden, it was nighttime.

I thought it was a solar eclipse at first.

That bright summer sun was instantly hidden from view and the darkness of midnight covered Las Vegas. The sand felt almost like static electricity as it hit my exposed skin. I couldn’t keep my eyes fully open. The smartphone kept vibrating in my hand, but I couldn’t even see the screen.

I knew opening my mouth would get me a stomach-full of sand, but I had to do it.

“Anastasia!! Get back inside the hotel!!”

“……———————!?”

I heard some kind of response from the girl, but I couldn’t make out any actual words. My voice might have sounded similar to her.

But that didn’t matter.

I could only pray she would follow after my voice if I kept shouting at the top of my lungs. I held the Class Rep in my arms and slowly moved back. I had almost entirely lost my sense of direction. The only things I could rely on were the grooves in the concrete roof below my feet.

My back finally bumped into the metal door leading inside.

Then Anastasia's small body ran into me. Her pet robot seemed to be fine too.

"Let's get inside! I'm opening the door, Anastasia!"

"Just get in there, Truth!!"

We pushed back inside the hotel with all three of us jumbled up together and then I kicked the door shut.

"Ugh, peh, peh!! There's so much sand in my mouth!!"

Anastasia seemed about ready to spit out her sandy gum, so I handed her the wrapper.

But this meant our one hope, the rescue chopper, had crashed.

No, it was worse than that.

The scraping sound I heard from the door was odd. Was the storm really that bad? It was supposedly fine sand hitting the door, but it sounded more like a wild beast was clawing at it.

It was so odd that Anastasia forgot to brush the sand off of her silk camisole and miniskirt.

"Satori-kun, Satori-kun! If there's a sandstorm, you can't let your guard down!! Get away from there immediately!!"

“Eri…ka?”

“Sure. There are reports of windows breaking and front doors bending during intense downbursts. And you compared those gels to army ants earlier, didn’t you? It would be incredibly dangerous if damage to the building left it no longer airtight.”

……
……

The focus of Anastasia’s and my eyes strayed a bit from the smartphone screen. Our eyes were still looking down, but we viewed the ground instead of the phone.

The gels could crawl on the ground or walls, so climbing to a building rooftop was not enough to escape them. We had proven that while Anastasia was on the run. And we knew the gels reacted to vibrations and currents in the air. What if the deafening noise of the helicopter had drawn them in and some of them had already crawled up the hotel wall to the roof?

Couldn’t they get in below the metal door?

A translucent red slime oozed in through that gap.

“Ugh.”

Unable to bear the chill racing down my spine, I just about screamed, but Anastasia’s small hand covered my mouth.

“…!!!???”

Unable to stay still, we made a mad dash down the stairs. But there we ran into another strange phenomenon.

We heard a loud noise that sounded a lot like all the building’s windows shattering. That meant they had more ways in. And just

like on the roof, what if some of them were already clinging to the wall?

“This is not good…”

Just as Anastasia said that, the previously-silent guest rooms threw open their doors. A blond man ran out into the sandy hallway, but a red slime enveloped him like a blanket.

There was nothing we could do.

His eyes seemed to meet mine at the final moment. He was shouting something, but I had no idea what it meant and he was engulfed and dissolved.

It was times like this when I really wished I understood English.

That was how hellish the situation was.

Some people rolled out through the door already covered in a gel and some doors shook while the person on the other side tried and failed to kick them down… However it happened, human lives were being lost at a rapid pace. There was some wet cloth clinging to the wall. *Oh, I guess they really do only eat living beings and can’t consume synthetic clothing.* My thoughts were wandering. I was trying to avoid focusing on this, just like someone who started reading an old manga volume they found while cleaning their room.

“All the guest room windows were broken by the wind…and the gels clinging to the windows and wall got in…”

“We can’t stay here. We need to get downstairs…”

Anastasia started to run, but I held her back.

“All the windows downstairs will be broken too! We need to

assume the gels are on every floor. At this rate, we'll probably end up trapped between two groups of gels if we take the stairs. Anywhere with a window will have gels!"

"Then what do we do, Truth? Take the elevator!?"

"No," said Maxwell. "That hotel's elevators are glass. The risk would be little different from the guest rooms even if you simply climbed down the shaft."

Yes, that was the problem.

This hotel was no longer safe. We had to escape if we were to survive. But how were we supposed to do that? We were helpless with both the stairs and elevator off limits.

"…No?"

"What is it, Truth?"

"Maxwell, what about the staff elevators? Surely not even shiny Las Vegas would use a glass elevator to carry the room service and linen carts."

"Sure. Acquiring data via hotel intranet. There are three staff elevators relatively close to that emergency staircase."

"Run, Anastasia."

I was hesitant to go. Was it really right to turn my back on the tragedy filling this floor? But there was nothing I could do. The hallway was filled with red slimes and there was no way around them.

Some of them reacted slightly to our movements – that is, to how our movements disturbed the dust and particles in the air – and they would leap at us if we got any closer.

We had to survive.

No matter what.

“What do we do about the elevator? They’ll all be stopped.”

“Even if they aren’t, we can’t escape an ambush if we simply ride it down normally. Maxwell. The top right of the door says EDE and the button panel says 11381518. Perform a search.”

“Sure. That is version 5 of the midsized industrial elevators made by Eddy Electronics. It is a special model that simplified the air conditioner to lighten the elevator and allow it to carry more weight. During a power outage, it can be unlocked by pressing the metal hook hidden on the door rail. You should have the best odds of success if you use a long and thin piece of metal similar to a ruler, slip it into the gap between the door and the lower rail, and move it like a saw.”

“Anastasia, let me borrow your Swiss Army knife. If we unscrew the fire extinguisher holder on the wall, its stainless steel frame should work perfectly.”

“It’s Maiden. And that flexible interface is really second to none, isn’t it?”

Is this any time to be praising Maxwell?

Once I had the L-shaped metal frame, I slipped it into the gap in the elevator and jerked it around. I felt kind of like a car thief. And damn was it ever loud. It worried me. If those gels reacted to sound directly instead of the disturbed air, then we were done for.

I detected the change from the solid sensation in my wrist rather than from the sound. I stuck my fingers in between the double door and spread them apart.

“Kh.”

I found a pit that felt a lot like a giant square smokestack. There was no need to keep the area lit at all times, so it was of course completely dark. When you couldn’t see the bottom of a hole, it filled you with an instinctual fear.

We had no lifeline and that pit was more than ten stories tall. All we had to rely on was a metal ladder with bars thinner than my thumb and our own arm strength.

But we had no choice but to go for it.

It was the one solid route with no windows.

“Class Rep… I guess I can’t exactly carry you down. You’ll have to do it yourself.”

“I-I’ll be fine…”

“Hey, I can’t see to the bottom. Are you sure there aren’t any gels lying in wait?”

Anastasia was more afraid than necessary and starting to freeze up, so I took the lead going down.

I grabbed the ladder’s rung and climbed down a bit.

“I guess the Class Rep can go second.”

“Eh? Why, Satori-kun?”

“Warning: Looking up in this situation could be seen as a dishonest act.”

Tch, Maxwell caught on.

At any rate, escaping the hotel came first. We descended the ladder with me first, the Class Rep second, and Anastasia third.

“Hm? Erika, Ayumi???”

At some point the video chat had cut off.

“Entering the elevator shaft has affected the signal,” explained Maxwell.

“But you’re still connected. And you’re back in a container in Japan.”

“Sure. However, I have routed my signal through the hotel’s local intranet while your sisters are using a signal sent directly in from outside.”

I had thought climbing down through seemingly endless darkness would be nothing but terrifying, but it was actually pretty easy. Just like with stairs, you didn’t have to check each and every step before taking it. You just had to get a rhythm going and follow that.

But I could feel my thoughts growing more inwardly focused as I repeated the simple task with nothing to look at. I could hear shouts and screams through the closed doors every time we reached another floor down, but I had no way of knowing if they were real or a figment of my imagination. The truth was I would have been happier to know they were only in my head.

How much time had passed?

“…It’s gotten quieter,” said the Class Rep.

That comment held great meaning, but no one said anything more. Not even the Class Rep herself.

We just continued down the ladder.

It made me feel like everyone else had vanished from the face of the earth, leaving only us behind.

And while I was in that forlorn state of mind, Maxwell gave a warning.

“User, you have reached the first floor.”

“Eh? But the shaft keeps going down…”

“There must be a basement.”

That was obvious once Maxwell mentioned it. And I had completely forgotten to count the floors each time we reached an elevator door. I may have been more panicked then I had realized.

Unlocking the door from the inside proved simple. The metal hook was like a thick lever and it was entirely exposed. I just had to push it with my hand to unlock the door. Once I pushed open the doors, I leaned out onto the inorganic floor. This was probably the back area for employees. A door somewhere would lead out to the familiar front lobby.

There was no one there.

I couldn’t sense any kind of presence.

Calm music played in the distance. Following that would probably lead us to the front lobby…but for some reason, none of us moved. We felt like we would regret seeing whatever was there.

“What do we do now, Satori-kun?”

“There’s an emergency exit sign over there…”

We could hear dry sand scraping against the other side of the door. The sandstorm was still underway, so we probably couldn’t even

stay standing out there. Running out there would be far too reckless. The gels would end up surrounding us while the wind and sand tossed us around. The sandstorm would be affecting the gels too, but that was like blindfolding both sides and having us wander when touching them meant instant death for us.

That said, the hotel was far from safe with the windows broken. We had to assume every floor – from the lobby to the roof – had been contaminated. If we stayed here, we would eventually be found and we would have nowhere to run.

While my mind raced, Anastasia slowly looked up.

“No, there might be a way.”

“?”

“Look at this, Truth. It’s this hotel’s security, but the basement block is isolated from the rest.”

She had apparently been casually performing a cyber attack with the handheld game system used as her pet robot’s head, but now was not the time to worry about that.

“There’s a casino down there, right?”

“It is Vegas, after all. This here is supposed to be the vault, but there’s some equipment that makes no sense with that.”

“?”

“A large fan. That kind of equipment is meant to keep the oxygen supply up during tunnel construction.”

“Wait a second. Are you saying what I think you are?”

“They’ve surreptitiously built a secret tunnel so they can escape

from below the casino if robbers show up. It doesn't branch off anywhere else, so it shouldn't be contaminated as long as the entrance is intact. What should we do, Truth? Isn't this our last chance?"

[confidential] Interview Records of an Imprisoned Group of Thieves [storage A51]

Vegas casinos aren't like South American banks. Only a complete dumbass would charge in the front entrance with a mask over their head and a gun in hand, but there's also a trick to secretly digging a tunnel to the vault.

America is a car culture, so unlike Europe, people say no one sees any real need to develop underground, but that's a complete and utter lie. There's the obvious things like power, gas, and plumbing, but people also tend to dig into the ground for anything they don't want the government to know about, so there's a whole mess of tunnels below Vegas. Alien autopsies and secret UFO labs are supposed to be deep underground, right? It's the same for everyone. From the sicko criminals to the government officials, everyone truly believes their secrets will be safe as long as they're hidden underground.

I was only caught because some moronic newbie screwed up and damaged a gas pipe.

So with that out of the way, what did you want to know about our tunnel digging? It's been a while since the guilty verdict. The newspapers, TV news, and even the online news will have forgotten all about it by now, so I doubt you're here to have me write up some tips on our crime technique.

Not that it matters to me.

But if you've got a question, make it quick. Don't assume you can see me again tomorrow or the day after that. I mean, we're tunnel diggers. Don't you forget that.

Chapter 3

The air-conditioning was on and music was playing inside the empty casino where chips and cards were strewn everywhere. But fortunately, there were no red slimes or half-melted victims.

“Truth.”

As we continued deeper in, Anastasia climbed over a bar counter and tossed me something large. I caught the heavy case that reminded me of a container of industrial cleaner.

“Orange juice?”

“It’s important to stay hydrated. Especially that Class Rep of yours since jetlag can be taxing on the body.”

Since it came from behind the bar counter, was it a cocktail chaser?

“But how many liters is this? How many weeks does it take for an American to drink all of this?”

“I can’t tell you anything about liters. This is the country of pounds and gallons, remember?”

Even after I poured a glass for each of us, there didn’t seem to be any less of it in the container. It was too heavy and bulky to carry, so we left the bottle after drinking a glass each.

“Oh, is that it, Truth?”

We found it in the very back, but in a location where the customers on the floor could see it.

The thick metal door was of course closed, but that did not matter. We pried it open with a cyber attack and walked right in.

The secret underground passageway unavoidably reminded me of the Bright Cross which had taken root deep below Kukyou City.

The walls and floor made of silver stainless steel were lined with entirely sterile fluorescent lights.

“(…Tch. I guess the floor isn’t reflective enough to see up the Class Rep’s skirt.)”

“Truth?”

“No one cares about yours, little girl.”

“That kind of hurts, you know!? It’s not that I want you to see, but I don’t like being entirely ignored either!!”

We continued our conversation while grappling a bit.

“Is this a normal sort of facility that any casino would have?”

“Don’t ask me. But this is Vegas. We’ll do anything to ensure our trust in money. The most common timing for bank robberies isn’t in transit or at the vault; it’s when the money is being loaded into the transport truck parked at the back entrance, so it would make sense to have a secret exit.”

Anastasia smoothly answered me in her unnecessarily feminine Japanese.

Las Vegas was a casino city, so if each of those casinos had a secret like this, wouldn’t the ground under the city be full of tunnels?

Once we entered a very long and straight passageway, we found a lot of people there. A man in a pricey suit leaned against the wall, a

bunny girl sat on the floor, and an elderly couple was holding each other close… The people here were definite survivors. When the commotion had begun, they had ignored the surrounding screams and prioritized their own safety. …And of course, we were no exception.

Anastasia gestured us onward.

“Focusing on the people here won’t change anything. Let’s keep going, Truth.”

“R-right.”

I really didn’t want to use this phrase when we were up against those gels, but this was a fluid situation. This place would not be safe forever and then the people here would leave like water being pumped out.

I think the passageway was more than a kilometer long.

It took me a while to notice the rail embedded in the center of the floor. There may have been an electric vehicle used to quickly travel its length.

“Pant, pant. We shouldn’t have left that orange juice. If I’d known this was coming, I would have at least filled up a bottle with tap water. I mean, that could make you sick if you’re unlucky, but this is no time to be picky and demand $4.99 bottles of carbonated water or mineral water. Right, Truth?”

“…Oh, that’s right. Water and food are going to become an issue from now on.”

The gels seemed to prey on living creatures, but it was unknown if they would eat “dead” food such as the meat and vegetables in the supermarkets. But if they would just devour everything, this would

be a major problem indeed.

Needless to say, we could not function without food and water. That could lead to conflicts between humans and not just versus the gels.

And if they could eat more than just humans, their movement patterns would be even more difficult to predict. They would probably physically trap us and go in for the attack.

“It’s looking like Vegas might be done for.”

“Yeah, maybe so…”

I chose not to provide a clear statement and stuck to a “maybe”.

“The situation is progressing at an accelerating rate,” said Maxwell. “If the damage spreads exponentially, it is easy to predict a scenario in which all people have vanished from Las Vegas and only those gels wander the streets.”

“Maxwell, is the damage limited to Las Vegas? Is this happening anywhere else?”

“No. There are some cases of misinformation being posted for amusement, but there is no objectivity to those reports. For the time being, I can say the damage is being contained to Las Vegas only.”

…*Contained, huh?*

That made it sound like things were a lot better than they could be.

But to be honest, I found it difficult to imagine Las Vegas’s administration making a counterattack. I mean, these liquid monsters could crawl through even the tiniest gap. Even if the actual danger went away, the damage to their reputation would

remain. The desert was a large place, so some would find it simpler to build a new casino city than to restore this one.

Once our conversation started to die down, a stairway leading up finally came into view. It really was a single straight passageway. I had to wonder how many other unconnected secret passageways ran below this city. It felt like walking along just one of the pieces of yarn in a hand-knit scarf.

We pressed our ears against the metal trap door to see what we could hear outside.

"…I don't hear the wind anymore," said Anastasia.

"Let's hope that isn't just because the door is so thick."

"No. Based on the personal site of a civilian meteorologist, the sandstorm has officially ended. I am currently checking several other sites to confirm…"

I pressed my palms against the door and took a deep breath. After preparing myself, I slowly opened the trap door.

A sudden gale…did not blow us away.

It was quiet.

The sandstorm had apparently settled down. But it was dark. That had nothing to do with weather conditions. It was simply close to sunset. But I could not appreciate the beautiful setting sun of that desert city. At the moment, it felt like running across a raging fire.

After I slowly climbed outside, a sour smell stung my nose. We were at a trash dump behind a restaurant. The casino couriers may have packed the cash and gold bars in trash bags and buckets before sending them underground.

And a question occurred to me.

“…Why is it so quiet?”

Las Vegas was known for having more outside tourists than actual residents. The average number on a weekday was more than four million. If that many people were fleeing from the gels, I should have heard heart-rending screams from every direction.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Anastasia sounded dazed as she nervously poked her head out.

The Class Rep held that 11-year-old from behind to help calm her unease. Or did her silk clothing just feel that good to the touch?

“Satori-kun, does this mean…?”

“Yes.”

This was the worst case scenario.

I placed that hurdle before us while praying that someone would prove me wrong.

“Everyone has already been wiped out… Those things have taken over Las Vegas.”

That changed how I thought about any presences I sensed.

The word “survivors” vanished from my mind.

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye.

That presence was like a mass of fattened pride that did not even try to hide itself. What was it that appeared from further down the alley? It was of course a translucent red slime the size of a home

refrigerator.

It was bigger than they were before.

…Or was this several of them combined?

We did not have time to sit around and think about it.

I kicked a rock at my feet to break a nearby restaurant window. The glass noisily shattered, the improved ventilation sent the wind blowing through the building, and the sand made its way inside the restaurant. Without even waiting for the gel to follow, I gestured the Class Rep and Anastasia.

“(Run.)”

The gel had come from further in the alley, so we were forced to flee toward the main road.

But things were even worse there.

The Class Rep flinched back like the sight had physically struck her.

“Uuh!?”

There was red everywhere.

It filled the large street which was as wide as a runway. It was like a river of jelly. We had known there were a lot of these things in Las Vegas, but wasn’t this a little too many!?

“Perhaps they can multiply or split apart,” suggested Maxwell. “If so, you need to quickly learn the conditions behind it.”

“…No.”

I audibly gulped.

On a closer inspection, I could tell this river was not a single solid mass. L-shapes, long bars, X-shapes, and fat clumps… A few different huge and malformed masses were packed in together like something from a falling block puzzle. It was just hard to tell since they all had the same color and texture.

“Apparent volume and actual mass doesn’t always match up. Like a chrysanthemum flower, a cheerleader’s pompoms, or the petticoat giving volume to the long skirt of a princess’s dress. There are several ways to increase volume.”

That would mean this was a collection of thin membranes…but it was still a threat.

The gels would dissolve and absorb anything biological they came in contact with. So even if this was only a change in appearance, the greater surface area was a threat.

I couldn’t tell the sidewalk apart from the road. Not even a martial arts master could have walked through there without touching a single drop.

“They weren’t doing this before,” said Anastasia. “Are they learning how to use their bodies?”

“…”

Whatever the case, we had to turn back.

It was all over if they noticed us.

I gestured to the Class Rep and Anastasia again and we slowly walked back the way we had come.

Just then, the previous red gel returned to the alley through the broken window.

We could not go forward or turn back.

There was no time to spare.

“Run!”

With the main road and back alley both blocked, we had no choice but to run into the restaurant before even checking inside. Just as I tackled the glass door open, I clearly sensed the entire city’s atmosphere crawling. I had made an enemy of Las Vegas. That was how it felt.

The red gel immediately charged in through the broken window. If we just ran around on the ground, we would be killed. Our only hope was what Maxwell had mentioned earlier.

All three of us desperately jumped over the counter and entered the kitchen. I had built up too much momentum and my back slammed into the oven door. It was an industrial oven that could probably cook a full pig.

And then the gel rushed in at me.

“!!”

I could not focus on anything else.

I opened the oven door and rolled to the side. The gel missed its target and ended up inside the cooking device, so I slammed my shoulder against the door to force it shut.

I felt a squeeze at my heart when the gel plastered itself against the heat-resistant glass a centimeter away from me. Fahrenheit? The units were unfamiliar, but I shouted out as I grabbed the knob and turned it as far as it would go.

The gas quickly ignited and began a merciless cremation.

With no mouth, the gel could not scream, but I did not have time to worry about that. From the way it thrashed around, it seemed to be suffering and in pain. Whether this would kill it or not was another matter.

A way to drive them back was enough.

I grabbed a few metal objects from the countertop, but the kitchen knife and fruit knife were too short and would leave me at risk. I had no choice but to duct tape one to the end of a mop handle and then switch on a gas burner. Even if blades had no effect on the gels, they would probably fear heated metal.

“Class Rep, there are some small gas cylinders for a portable stove there, so grab a few of them.”

“S-sure…”

“Um, Truth, are you trying to build a bomb?”

“In the culinary world, there are handheld burners used to add scorch marks to fish. If we use one of those to periodically heat the end of this knife spear, it won’t lose its effectiveness. …But a bomb might not be a bad idea. Maxwell, locate any strong drinks with a high alcohol content. If we mix that in a bottle with some liquid cleaner, it should work as a Molotov cocktail.”

“Warning: Spreading fire in a disaster environment is not recommended.”

“It’s an emergency. Please.”

Using the data displayed when I viewed them through my smartphone, I selected a bottle from among the alcoholic drinks lined up on a shelf.

That was when a low tremor shook the entire restaurant.

“What was that? An earthquake?”

“No,” replied Maxwell. “Rather than traveling through the ground, the vibration appears to be in the walls. It is likely caused by an irregular disturbance in the air.”

The Class Rep looked around worriedly with several gas cylinders in her arms.

Anastasia gulped.

“Hey, this is bad, Truth. Your handmade weapons might not be much help.”

“You don’t mean…”

“Sure. I have completed the air fluid dynamics calculations based on the shaking of the outer wall. It seems the ‘river’ outside is reacting.”

“W-wait. That was only increasing its apparent volume, so its actual weight didn’t change, right? So it should only be able to float around like a balloon or styrofoam, right!?”

“Sure. However, whether it is made of steel or plastic, there is no difference in the disturbance to the air - that is, the wind gust - created by a fan of the same size. If that great volume is waved all at once, it can likely create the same force as a hammer of air.”

“…!?”

I didn’t even have time to scream.

I abandoned my half-made Molotov cocktail, grabbed my knife spear, and ran for the back entrance. Just as we all ran out into the alley, the entire restaurant was flattened as if a giant hand had slapped down on it. The force was so great that it felt like we were

reading a surreal children's book.

The oddity stared down at us like a brontosaurus made by patching together several malformed bags of water.

It swung its head around. If that hit us, we would become mincemeat even without the powerful acid effect. It wasn't like it could help, but I still threw the heated knife spear.

To that thing, it had to have been like a fairy throwing a toothpick.

And yet.

Nevertheless.

As soon as the knife spear hit it, the red brontosaurus writhed in pain, failed to support its own weight, and flipped over. I saw something like translucent red flower petals scattering into the sky. It may have been returning to its original puddle-like body because it could not maintain the extra volume of a cheerleader's pompom or a princess's long skirt.

But that was all it took?

The effect was so dramatic that I wished I hadn't let go of the knife spear.

"Anyway, we need to get out of here. Class Rep, Anastasia!"

The same miracle might not happen twice. Since we hadn't held repeated experiments, it could always be something other than the heat that caused it. If we could run away, we had to do so. That had to be our fundamental strategy.

"What do we do now, Truth!?"

"The sandstorm is gone, so the job for the rescuers will be the

same. They'll be coming from the sky, so we'll have to wait for rescue while providing some kind of signal near a heliport!"

"No," said Maxwell. "The situation has changed in the past few hours. I can detect no cellphone signals being sent out in vain. The digital screams have gone silent. Other than the few survivors underground, we should assume everyone has been killed."

…I knew that.

We had to assume most of the four million people in Las Vegas had been swallowed up. If those things could increase their apparent volume like flower petals, they could form a bridge between buildings and even break down a building wall using that air hammer. That restaurant was a good example. Holing up in a solid fortress and waiting it out was no longer an option. And if the outside rescuers decided the city was utterly destroyed, they might not even send out any more helicopters.

But.

Even so.

I had to bet on the possibility with the greatest odds of success. After all, it wasn't just my life at risk here. The Class Rep and Anastasia were here too. I at least wanted to get them on a helicopter. No matter what.

Just then, the Class Rep threw a question my way as she ran behind me.

"But are you really okay with that, Satori-kun?"

"Kh."

This was the best option.

This was a humanitarian way of thinking that would most reduce the risk of death.

But the Class Rep gently said more.

As if gently stabbing me.

“I mean, if you do that, you can’t save Erika-san or Ayumi-chan.”

[confidential] Request for Preservative Chemicals [storage A51]

The unfortunate debris accident during extravehicular activity the other day has raised a new concern. If an astronaut does die during an experiment, where will their body be kept and preserved? How can we best preserve the ship’s hygienic environment? We wish to prevent the spread of disease. Both for the health of the astronauts and to reduce the risk of contaminating the lunar surface with bacteria from earth.

The view of outer space as a great emptiness is changing as our architectural and shipbuilding technology increases. If we continue building stations above a certain size, there is a risk of breeding our own greatest enemy out in space.

It is possible we earthlings could create the aliens ourselves. Even if it started out as perfectly normal intestinal bacteria, it is unknown what effects the cosmic rays, weightlessness, and other aspects of an extraterrestrial environment could have, so we cannot ignore this. We must not produce casualties on a greater level than the Spanish flu or the bubonic plague.

Russia has suggested we solve this problem using preservation technology. Similarly, we have contacted Herbal Science. We have decided to begin experimentation using some of the preservatives used for Archenemy development.

Chapter 4

It was all connected.

It all began with my destruction of the Bright Cross.

As a zombie, Ayumi's body would begin to rot without periodic preservation treatment. That had been done by one of the "relatively harmless" divisions within the Bright Cross.

With nowhere else to turn, Ayumi had apparently relied on an American pharmaceutical company with the same tech – or rather, that had lent its internal tech to the Bright Cross. And of course, she had kept this from me. Since it would have been dangerous to go on her own, Erika had gone with her.

But the scheduled day had passed and they had not returned to Japan.

"From there, I had Maxwell mess with the drawing for movie extras. We needed a pretty major excuse for a Japanese student like me to make an unsupervised foreign trip."

The one piece of luck was that my sisters were unharmed. They were locked in somewhere, but they could contact me via video chat when their captors were not paying attention.

I had managed to reach Las Vegas and was preparing to investigate the pharmaceutical company when those gels had begun their citywide rampage like some kind of preemptive strike.

The sun had completely set by the time we lost the gels which had learned how to increase their apparent volume. We had escaped to

a boxy smoking area made of thick but transparent acrylic panels. The gels used their skin rather than eyes to hunt. It would be pointless if the acrylic panels themselves vibrated, but it would still be harder for them to find us with that barrier between us.

“Why did you take so long to tell me something so important, Truth!?”

“Because I was pretty sure you would run headlong into danger if I did. I mean, crackers love breaking into major corporations in the first place, so add a bizarre sense of righteousness on top of that and you’d start a full-throttle game of chicken.”

“The term is hackers! …Honestly.” Anastasia pouted her lips in her red camisole and tennis-style miniskirt that, annoyingly enough, were all silk. “So what’s the villain’s name? This could be any number of pharmaceutical companies. That’s just how dangerous they are.”

“What if I told you it was a pharmaceutical company in Las Vegas?”

“Oh, hell.”

That had apparently been enough. Anastasia placed a hand over her eyes and looked up into the sky.

“Herbal Science, then. They originally sold cigarettes, but the negative campaigns grew too powerful and they shifted into pharmaceutics. They sold both the cigarettes and the nicotine addiction drugs to make double the money.”

That had led to further dark rumors that they had similar scams going with drugs more serious than tobacco. In other words, they were secretly distributing dried grass and rock candy so they could sell the anti-addiction drugs. No matter which side of the equation sold more, Herbal Science still profited.

“So is it them, Truth?”

“I couldn’t turn up anything. But if they were clean, they wouldn’t have such strict defenses. It’s so suspicious it makes you wonder if they’re hiding a decomposing corpse in their vault.” I breathed out. “It isn’t clear why they’re interested in Archenemies, but given their logic, we can make a decent guess, can’t we?”

The Bright Cross had been following a twisted philosophy that led them to believe they were helping everyone by managing the Archenemies.

But Herbal Science was different.

This was driven by an almost pure love of money. They weren’t thinking of anyone but themselves.

“They infect humans…and make money off of the cure? B-but wait. There is no cure for vampires or zombies! They’d win several Nobel Prizes if they had one!”

“That’s right.”

That was why.

That was why this was such a big problem.

“They’re underestimating my sisters.”

“…”

“They think they’ve conquered all Archenemies with nothing more than some preservation treatments. If they spread the infection, they won’t be able to control it. Herbal Science will be destroyed first and the rest of the world that will have to deal with their problem for them.”

“Hmm,” groaned the Class Rep. She seemed close to recovering from her jetlag. “But what was this gel attack? Was that Herbal Science’s doing too?”

“…”

“Of course it was! It was meant to stop Truth when he’s so close to taking them down!”

“No.” I rejected the idea. “Why would they go this far for a single Japanese student? If this was Herbal Science’s attack, they’ll have made an enemy of the White House. Besides, if they had an Archenemy like those gels, they wouldn’t need Erika and Ayumi as well. They could have just spread the gels.”

“Oh… Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“The gels are weak to heat. With a simple weakness like that, selling a means of defeating them would be easy. So I doubt they would abandon that and go with an uncontrollable vampire or zombie instead.”

Of course, it was always possible they wanted several different Archenemies for more variety.

“In that case, Satori-kun. …I feel bad saying it, but isn’t this our chance?”

I brought a hand to my face when I heard the Class Rep’s question.

Yup.

Herbal Science was located in Las Vegas despite being a pharmaceutical company because, as Anastasia has pointed out, they originally sold the king of luxury goods: cigarettes. Since shifting into pharmaceutics, they had developed new drugs that matched the city’s style, such as hangover drugs and fatty liver

drugs.

While I thought about that, we arrived downtown. But this was Las Vegas, so there were neon lights and bright screens everywhere. Some areas had become tunnels like a pathway through an aquarium.

The smart building located between the casinos and theatres blended into the scenery, but that was why it felt so fiercely malevolent. It was a lot like seeing the pawn shop or the consumer loan dispenser inconspicuously located next to a pachinko parlor or horse racing track. Even if there was nothing intrinsically wrong with it, the combination was horrifying.

“Hey, Truth,” said short Anastasia.

I had wanted to find a way to protect our hands and feet, but this was a city of casinos and bars. If we had run across a mall, we might have found a diving wetsuit…but maybe not in a desert city like this. The thick rubber might have come in handy if the gels really did insist on only eating biological things, though.

In that sense, a rescue team in thick fireproof clothing would have been more reassuring than soldiers or police who wore short sleeves in the desert.

“Would they really hold something as infectious as an Archenemy at their headquarters in the city? There’s plenty of unpopulated desert just outside the city.”

“Hey, Maiden, if they had really built the perfect prison, would my sisters be able to call me up for a video chat so often?”

“Ah.”

“They’re even stupider than you think. What they believe to be

perfect is actually full of holes. And that's all the more reason we can't leave this in their hands."

…Now, then.

"What do you think, Maxwell?"

"Sure. Anyone with normal sensibilities would put together some kind of plan once you were sighted in Las Vegas."

"You mean they would try to kill Satori-kun?"

"No. They could easily abduct him by threatening him with a gun and he would be much more valuable taken alive and used as a collar to restrain Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi. Since they have not done so, they must be very confident in their own techniques."

They were nothing but idiots.

I could already predict what had happened at Herbal Science without making an unannounced visit at the front gate.

Who had released the gels and why were different matters entirely.

"Yeah, I had a feeling this is what we'd find."

I had considered faking a part-time janitor's ID to pretend I was taking shelter in the building, but that proved unnecessary.

There was no one at the front gate.

There was no one at the reception counter either.

I stepped through the entrance gate and looked around, but I couldn't spot a single person.

I only saw some synthetic clothing lying on the floor, presumably

from the night guards.

“The gels!? Dammit!!”

There would be no point in faking an ID and pretending to be a part-time janitor.

They must have reacted to the movement of air caused by the swaying of our limbs or rubbing of our clothing because red masses dripped down from the ceiling. I had thought the metal detector gate was useless at this point, but a loud buzzer began to blare when we ran through it. The gels only reacted to movements of the air, so sound itself would not matter…or so I hoped. I gestured the Class Rep and Anastasia further in. We were headed for the emergency stairs to the side of the elevator hall.

…I noticed these gels weren’t puffing themselves up.

Anastasia had theorized they had learned how to use their bodies, so it may have been a difference in individual knowledge. Or had they begun to learn that taking in air and increasing their apparent volume like flower petals or a petticoat slowed them down?

“S-Satori-kun. Should we really just go in without permission like this!?”

“It’s an emergency, so we can claim we came here looking for help!”

It was Herbal Science that could not have anyone taking a close look at things. It would actually help us if they got the justice system involved.

We could not take our time and avoid creating any wind as we moved. As we ran across the floor, we saw movement in the tucked-away employee vending machine area.

My eyes met with someone else's.

When I saw the glistening black metal in their hand, I did not hold back.

"Maxwell, detonate their cellphone's battery!!"

With a loud bursting sound, the many gels hesitated and then started toward the vending machine area instead. I could see the Herbal Science worker dragging one leg while desperately trying to get away.

…There were dangers around every corner. Both human and Archenemy.

"Pant, pant! Truth, this building is like a maze. We need to watch out for blind spots!"

We finally arrived at the emergency stairs, but this was where the real challenge began. Not all of the gels had gone to the vending machine area and there could be some lying in wait up ahead. We were in a cramped area with lots of blind spots and little room for evasion. We had to be even more careful now.

But Herbal Science had probably collapsed as an organization. They had failed to stop the gels. There were security cameras in the emergency stairwell, but there was no sign of armed guards rushing in to stop us. Everyone may have been holding their breath and adjusting their goals downward to ensure their own personal survival.

"(Truth, there's a gel on the next landing.)"

No matter how small it was, we could not break through with brute force. With its living prey, it was more dangerous than concentrated sulfuric acid. If it touched us, we would be devoured.

Our only choice was to open a nearby door and enter that midway floor.

This may have been the general affairs or accounting department because the office of normal desks and chairs seemed out of place for a pharmaceutical company. Or maybe this was the proper look for a company headquarters in a major city.

At any rate, a game of tag in a building with limited routes was not the best plan. The three of us squeezed underneath a random desk together and I gave Maxwell some instructions.

“Take control of a computer located away from us and the exit and then run the fans. Find one that’s on a table and move some bread or pastry someone left behind. If possible, something with ham or egg in it would be best. If they eat biological matter, we can use protein and carbs as bait.”

“Sure.”

“For example, that…what, what is that? Why is that popcorn blue???”

“Obviously because it’s Blue Hawaii flavor, Truth.”

…And what kind of flavor is that? How can you Americans eat things that look so toxic?

“Ahem. Maxwell, check the sprinklers too. Activate them once we start moving. If we’re right, they sense the movement of the air by dissolving the small particles floating in it. If we knock the dust out of the air with water, won’t their accuracy drop?”

“Geh. You’re going to dump water on our heads!?”

…Even after all this calculation, it could end up being useless. My predictions could be entirely wrong and we would just get eaten.

My heart was pounding in my ears. The Class Rep's warmth saved me. If I had been alone, I might have been overwhelmed and only able to scream.

"C-c'mon, Truth, don't nestle up against me like that. Well, if you insist."

"Tch."

"I'm not going to forget that tongue click, Truth."

A damp splatting sound cut off our whispers. I fully focused on my ears.

Was the gel approaching or leaving? We were hiding to protect ourselves, but that kept us from seeing what was going on. It was like some kind of paradox.

That was when a great downpour began dumping rain on us.

"Emergency! Please run!!"

I didn't know what was going on, but we had to do what Maxwell said. I stood up on the floor, which was slippery from the sprinkler water, and looked up to find a gel surprisingly nearby. The bait hadn't worked!? My throat went dry, but there was no point in screaming. Luckily, the sprinkler water acted as a slight barrier. We ran toward the exit while it hesitated.

"You cannot trust the previous emergency stairs. Please head toward the other stairway on the opposite side of the floor."

The Class Rep had started back the way we had come, so I grabbed her arm and we cut across the wet floor.

Anastasia grabbed a pumpkin decoration from a desk along the way.

“What’s that for? Are you going to throw it to distract the thing with the vibration?”

“It’s a tacky lighter. The gels are weak to fire, right?”

We would lose everything if we set fire to the building before rescuing Erika and Ayumi, but it could help hold off the gels. Just like an oil lighter, the flame did not go out even after you released your finger. After lighting a fingertip-sized flame from the pumpkin’s head, we placed it in front of the metal emergency staircase door while making sure the fire would not spread. Then we left the floor.

They could slip through the gaps in a normal door.

…And yet there was no pursuit as we ran up the stairs. Even if it was just a lighter, a fire seemed to help a lot.

“Damn, we really should have made a torch when we had the chance.”

“The gels aren’t our only enemy. If someone with a gun finds us, they’ll turn us to Swiss cheese.”

The Class Rep was right.

At any rate, a silent world spread out around us. We could not relax because we could be attacked at any moment, but the emergency stairs were not the place to find anything useful in a fight. My only option was to grab the fire extinguisher on the landing.

“Truth, what about an axe instead? There has to be one for breaking down doors somewhere.”

“Drop that and I’d be short some toes, so no thank you.”

Besides, we were crammed into this narrow stairwell. I couldn’t

exactly swing around a big weapon like that.

Then Maxwell interrupted.

“I have detected voices beyond that door.”

“…”

That meant it wasn’t the gels.

But if it was someone from Herbal Science, that was a problem too. I had no idea what the proper way to deal with a bullet was.

“How many? What should we do?”

“No. The pattern suggests they are young female voices speaking Japanese. Analyzing voice prints…”

Hm?

Does that mean…?

We nodded and then slowly opened the metal door.

And there we found…

“Huh? Onii-chan?”

“Oh, my, my. Did you come all this way for us?”

It felt far too easy.

This was my older sister with gorgeous blonde ringlet curls and a black gothic lolita dress and my younger sister with black twintails balled up at the end and sportswear. They were laughing in the center of a room and surrounded by several layers of thick reinforced glass.

I set down the fire extinguisher and Anastasia, who had been clinging to my waist, quickly moved back.

“Wait…what is this place…?”

Test tubes lazily strewn about. Plastic gloves set down just anywhere after being removed. A half-opened glass door. Even an amateur could tell just how careless this place was. And those careless people had tried to use Archenemies, infection sources which could truly bring down an entire continent.

“They called it their secret lab.”

“They probably thought they were being tricky by not using a facility deep in the mountains or on a remote island. Well, I suppose Las Vegas *is* surrounded by desert.”

“Wait,” interrupted the kind Class Rep. “Erika-san, Ayumi-chan! Don’t you have something else to say!? Satori-kun recklessly flew all the way to America for this!!”

“Oh, be still my heart.”

“Oh, be still my heart.”

“Not the reaction I was looking for! Be more disheartened!!”

Incidentally, I had not really been worried that some perverted scientist was experimenting on my sisters. I had been more afraid they would snap and fill North America with vampires and zombies. But I kept that to myself because they were sure to hit me if they knew.

Meanwhile, the Class Rep was being her usual dutiful self.

“Oh, but what happened with your preservatives, Ayumi-chan? Um, didn’t you have to rely on this exploitative company?”

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. There does not seem to be anyone left to inspect their internet security, so let’s leak all of their confidential data. Once it has spread around the globe, Miss Ayumi should be able to choose who she wants to do business with. Let’s go generic.”

“Ah! Then let’s see who can break the lock first, Truth. I’ve gotten pretty fast at these things!”

The Class Rep had to hold her head in her hands.

It looked like things were headed toward something of a happy ending.

However.

“B-by the way, Erika. And Ayumi too. There’s one thing I’m worried about.”

“Heh heh. Not to worry, boy. I didn’t let them touch me where it matters most.”

“It’s the way you keep bringing these things up that’s worrying me about the main issue!!”

And if you make that kind of joke, the Class Rep coldly glares at me *as well, so please stop! Or are you trying to hit me with indirect damage!?*

“E-Erika?”

“Why aren’t you asking me, Onii-chan? Fuguu.”

That’s because you’re kind, so I trust you to hold back in the real world, even if you don’t in a simulator.

In this case, the greatest threat was my older sister who looked gentle but was actually a total S.

“I pretty much know what happened to the people here. Being eaten by the gels kind of feels like their just deserts or like god was watching what they did. So that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Hmm, then what is your point?”

“…Umm. What happened to the gels that devoured Herbal Science? The ones in the halls and main floors weren’t all of them, right? That wasn’t nearly enough to take out everyone in the building.”

There was just one important point.

Not “where did they go”, but “what happened to them”.

Hee hee.

“Well, you see. I was wondering what kind of grand plan and extravagant stage setting to put together for those trying to profit off of my cute little sister. Once I managed to leave their faces a bloody mess with almost disappointing ease, I was planning to stick a wooden stake up their ass like you might drive a stake through someone’s heart and then drag them around a bit, but then a mysterious gel showed up and stole them from me. I suppose you could say I was infuriated, so I had no choice but to blow off some steam beating up those damn gels that had devoured those damn workers. By the way, Satori-kun, did you know this building has a large incinerator in the third basement to prevent contamination from biological agents? It uses propane, so it can incinerate just fine even during a power outage. Really, having an undying body is not always fun. Hee hee hee. But since they can’t scream, their suffering is hard to sense, just like with the brazen bull, so it loses major points for that. Now, how long has it been since I stuffed them in the oven?”

“Wah! Wahhh!!
Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

“Well…that is true. In that case, the gels can’t eat rubber or plastic, right? Should we fill in any gaps with putty and rubber adhesive?”

It felt like we were fortifying ourselves against army ants.

This was a lot like those idiots had gotten carried away and self-destructed, leaving their secret base behind. We had to make use of it.

Or so I thought.

“Oh?”

“Warning, user.”

I heard some light surprise from the ones checking through Herbal Science’s storage.

“An email has arrived for the company president. It used an emergency line to get through despite the communication restrictions.”

“Where exactly is it from?”

Even if these were greedy fools, they had sold technology to the Bright Cross. It was unclear where that connection was. This would be quite dangerous if a very American PMC had been sent in to retake this building.

But that was apparently not what this was about.

“I can’t read English. Maxwell, translate.”

“Sure. …You really can’t even understand this?”

My blonde sister looked more shocked than me.

“Ehh!? You’re that shocked!? Erika, you briefly forgot we’re family, didn’t you!?”

“N-no, that’s not true at all…”

“The tremor in your voice, the way you can’t look me in the eye. It is true! Wahhhhhh!!”

But then I felt a tug on my jacket.

It was Anastasia.

“No, Truth. The email displayed here is just that bad.”

“?”

Just as I tilted my head, I heard a quiet electronic tone. When I held my smartphone up to the computer screen, the Japanese text appeared for me.

President of Herbal Science,

The promised time period has passed. We really should have handled this from the beginning, but we handed control over to you since you so obstinately insisted. And now look at things. Unfortunately for you, we will now take back control.

If you wish to evacuate, feel free.

However, we will not delay our schedule. We are currently beginning the heat treatment of the entire city, so good luck.

…What was this?

Someone had negotiated with Herbal Science from a position of superiority. And now that Herbal Science could not be contacted, they were taking back control.

They had mentioned a heat treatment of the entire city.

Those words sounded incredibly ominous.

And when I scrolled the text to the end, I froze in place.

P.S. I am sure those girls were well beyond your control, but I do have my own feelings on the matter. It is time you learned that firsthand. With a handwritten curse from Amatsu Yurina.

Why?

Why here?

Why was that name here?

“…Oh, no.”

When Ayumi said that, she was not looking at the computer screen. She was looking at the space outside of the thick reinforced glass walls. It was most likely a tablet belonging to one of the researchers.

They had probably used it to periodically gain information on the outside world while closed up in this room. It displayed security camera footage from outside the building.

“There’s something huge up in the night sky. This is really, really bad! That’s something from a war movie!!”

“No,” said Maxwell. “Even in a gun culture like America, it seems unlikely they would use strategic stealth bombers to resolve a domestic incident.”

“And yet there they are!”

“For a domestic incident, yes.” Erika corrected the AI. “But what

about preventing the spread of a highly infectious and deadly disease, or diverting a giant hurricane away from a major city? …If it wasn't targeted at people, wouldn't the various hurdles be much lower?"

"Maxwell, what will happen if that strategic whatever-it's-called flies around overhead!?"

"In the worst case, it could be loaded with 20 of the mid-sized nuclear bombs that were recently improved. It does have 'strategic' in its name, after all."

The way Maxwell said it so plainly actually made it harder for my thoughts to keep up.

I screamed…I think.

But I couldn't hear what it was I yelled.

A moment later, my vision and hearing were blown away and even the concept of up and down vanished.

[confidential] Pre-Mission Briefing [storage A51]

This is a disaster relief mission.

A biological contaminant has appeared in Las Vegas. To swiftly stop the spread of damage before it crosses the desert, a bomber unit will be sent in.

We must handle this carefully.

While there were some lucky hits with balloon bombs, in the 300

years since its founding, the United States has never been hit by a largescale and strategic aerial bombing by another nation. It is somewhat ironic that it is our own Air Force that will first do so, but do not think of this as scorching the earth of your own nation. Remember that you are fighting for the liberation of Las Vegas.

This is a fluid situation. The basic plan is given in your mission papers, but keep in mind that any of it could change at any time. There will likely also be requests from the scene. Your adaptability will be tested here. Assume that your work tonight will preserve the lives and dignity of everyone, military or civilian, who walks on the surface. Do not think that each second of delay is a single life lost. Assume a single mistake will mean losing everything. Maintaining that sense of tension is what matters. Carry it in your highly-trained body and mind.

Now, you sewer rats who wished to be birds, your special black wings are waiting for you. Only 21 of those exist in the world.

Chapter 5

My head was assaulted by an intense dizziness and headache.

The pain felt like having an icepick shoved into my temple, but that was what finally clued me in: I wasn't dead yet. I still wasn't sure what *had* happened, but it apparently had not been a mid-sized nuclear bomb dropped on Las Vegas.

I forced my eyes open while pathetically collapsed on the floor. That floor was now slanted and the outer wall was entirely missing. I wasn't sure if I should call it a "normal bomb", but it apparently had not directly hit this building. This was no more than a side effect of the open-air explosion.

A scorched smell filled the outside air.

The cityscape should have been illuminated by a deluge of light from the electronic signs that automatically changed based on their program control, but it was instead burned with red and black. And in the night sky stained with black smoke, several unfamiliar silhouettes formed a V shape. Something like beans formed lines as they were dropped to the surface.

Were all of those bombs with the destructive power we had just experienced?

"Ha…ha ha."

None of it felt real.

We were right here, but the destruction felt so far away. It was like seeing something happening on a screen. Did people just give up on

the world like this when they were faced with a result they couldn't change no matter how hard they tried?

But in truth, we had been lucky.

If the bomb had been just 10 meters closer, the shockwave might have squeezed the organs inside our bodies. Our limbs and heads were still attached and in this case that meant fortune had been smiling on us.

But just as I thought that, I felt something wet on my palm.

"…H-hey, Truth…"

You're kidding, right?

"Sorry, but I screwed up a little. Ha ha. I've escaped so many close calls online, but this is the first time I've felt death so close in reality…"

We had been in the same location.

She was collapsed right next to me. The conditions should have been the same. And yet a finger-thick piece of rebar from the building wall was piercing Anastasia's camisole and the belly below it!

"Wait, what is this? Please wait!! Anastasia!?"

"How many times do I have to tell you it's Maiden…?"

Unable to get up, I crawled over and held that small body in my arms. And yet that pale-faced friend smiled at me.

Was she trying to mask the pain? No, there was no way she could bear it.

So had her sense of pain already left her…?

“If it gets bad, please leave me behind.”

“No! What is this!? Why are you giving up so easily!? Put up more of a fight! Cry and scream and ask for help!! Can you not stop looking down on everyone even now!?”

“What are you…talking about? This is a special deal. I wouldn’t bother putting on this front for someone I didn’t care about. Truth, if you weren’t here, I would be acting like an 11-year-old kid already. I’d be stupidly crying and thrashing about, probably tearing the wound wider in the process. But I don’t want to show that side of me. Not to you.”

A short distance away, Erika got up with a hand on her head, looked to us in surprise, and then bit her lip a little. Her sharpened canine tooth…no, her vampire fang sank a bit into her soft lip.

Was she saying that choice might be necessary?

Was she saying that would be better than doing nothing as the fragile vessel of this life broke?

…Was she saying she should bite her?

I shook my head.

No. I couldn’t have her commit that crime. Once I started down that slippery slope, I would begin “saving” everyone that way. And I couldn’t do that.

Besides, this small girl had drawn out what little strength remained in that injured body to say this to me.

So could I really just grab onto my sister’s skirt and hide behind her? I had to respond in kind. I had to stand up to protect this life!!

“Anastasia…”

“What, were you so moved that you’re going to confess your love?”

“I will save you. And I won’t let anyone in this world say otherwise.”

That small friend was at a loss for words.

No.

That pretty and arrogant face crumpled like she had been caught off guard. It looked like a dam was about to burst. She probably wanted to cover her face, but she could not move her hands properly.

She finally moved her trembling lips to speak.

“…You’re an idiot.”

We couldn’t remove the rebar piercing Anastasia’s gut here. That would only increase the blood loss.

“Maxwell, does this smartphone still work?”

“Sure.”

“Check the Herbal Science intranet to see if we can perform first aid here.”

“No. The connection is down. The server itself has been destroyed, so it is inaccessible.”

“Then search for a nearby hospital! America spends more on medicine than anyone, so this city of the rich and famous has got to be as flooded with doctors as lawyers, right!?”

“But will you be performing the medical treatment? She will clearly

need stitches for her abdominal cavity and blood vessels."

"I don't know what the laws are here, but they have a lot of those remote operation stations in this country, right? Maxwell, search for a medical manual in some university hospital or another. If possible, find software for a serious game meant to teach surgical technique. Use your processing power to start learning it through repetition until you have it all down pat. Maxwell, you supply the actual technique based on my requests!!"

"Sure. Accessing the necessary data… Completed trace from a medical data sharing service that connects hospitals to remote operation stations. The closest such station is in the underground parking lot for the Desert Dream casino. That is a 10 minute walk from Herbal Science. However, the road layout on the map may no longer apply after the bombing, so be careful."

"A parking lot?"

"It is a medical truck for a VIP's personal doctor. It is equipped for surgery inside. The client must have been very worried about their health."

"That's a step beyond always having an ambulance on standby. Did they just walk around with a mini-hospital at all times? They probably should have put more effort into going jogging than getting medical tests run…"

At any rate, we knew what to do.

I looked around the room. The Class Rep…was still passed out. Unlike Anastasia, she did not seem injured, but her condition was the normal one. I was the weird one for getting up so quickly despite not being an Archenemy.

Herbal Science had collapsed, my sisters were freed, and the data

on Ayumi's preservative had been spread across the globe. That should have left nothing for us to do in Las Vegas.

"Erika, Ayumi. I now have one more thing I have to do. You two take the Class Rep and get out of here. If the military is heat treating Las Vegas, the bombs shouldn't fall on you if you head out into the desert."

"What are you talking about, Satori-kun? We can't let you take the best part for yourself."

"Fuguu. I'd be too afraid to let a normal human head out there carrying an injured person. There are gels everywhere and 2-ton raindrops are falling from the sky. Those are powerful enough to blow *me* to pieces if one lands on me."

…I had an excellent family.

After bowing once to show I understood, I got straight to business.

"Let's get going!"

It was possible I could not change the result here no matter how hard I tried.

But I wasn't going to let anyone say that.

We'll tear down all the barriers in the way, Anastasia!!

We pulled two poles off of a steel rack and attached a double layer of lab coats between them for a makeshift stretcher.

Anastasia was pierced front to back, so we could not carry her on our back or in our arms. After placing her on the stretcher on her side, Ayumi and I picked it up. Erika carried the unconscious Class

Rep on her back.

With both my hands full, I could not hold my smartphone. I had no choice but to place it on the stretcher next to Anastasia's head.

"Let's go, Ayumi. Don't drop her."

"I won't, I won't."

The building was in bad shape. The ceiling could collapse at any time, sending down chunks of concrete larger than a refrigerator.

"There will be gels and Herbal Science survivors outside of this floor, so be careful."

"Onee-chan."

"Leave it to me."

If Erika came into contact with those gels, she would be eaten just like anyone else. And I was afraid to have her as our vanguard when she had the Class Rep on her back, but I couldn't be picky.

"She isn't going to fight," casually said Ayumi while carrying the stretcher. "She's a vampire, so she can regenerate her body. If she wants to, she can tear off an arm or a leg and throw it to them as bait."

"Erika, you idiot…"

I just about yelled at her despite the situation. I didn't want that beautiful family member doing that! The virtual sisterly fight had been bad enough!!

However…

"I was prepared to do that, but they aren't interfering."

“You don’t need to do that. …But is this due to the bombing?”

The emergency stairwell had been destroyed in places and we could see the sinister red and black nightscape beyond. A sauna-like heated wind blew in through the holes. Even without the direct flames reaching them, the gels’ actions may have been greatly restricted. Or perhaps the intense noise and vibrations had messed with their sensory organs.

The answer didn’t really matter.

We didn’t have time to stand around.

If we could keep going, we had to.

“…It’ll be okay.”

Never before had someone else’s life felt so close by.

“It’ll be okay, Anastasia.”

I had to repay her. With that alone on my mind, I kept my feet moving while making sure I did not trip on the stairs.

The weight on the stretcher didn’t bother me.

In fact, how light she felt actually worried me.

We somehow made it back to the first floor entrance. All the glass was broken and we stepped out from the half-crushed entrance.

A red hell spread out before our eyes.

Gaudy Las Vegas was nowhere to be seen. I had no idea why it was all burning so well, but flames erupted from all the windows of the reinforced concrete buildings. The black forms unnaturally wriggling near the windows had to be the gels. I could only pray

they were not survivors.

I grew faint just from breathing in and out. The stench of smoke lingered in the depths of my lungs. I was once again worried about Anastasia on the stretcher.

“The bomber formation seems to be bombing another part of the city.”

Erika was staring off into the distance with the unconscious Class Rep on her back.

With the powerful and deep sound of explosions, all the dust on the ground burst up in a band of destruction beyond the buildings. There would be no escape if we were caught by that. The air around us would be compressed and crush us beyond recognition.

Ayumi spoke to me while staring up into the night sky which burned red as it reflected the flames.

“Onii-chan, let’s head around back.”

“Fine, but will that really help?”

“Yes, that is the right answer. They seem to be dividing Las Vegas into blocks to trap and eliminate the gels with walls of flames. So they appear to be dropping incendiary bombs along the main roads.”

“But then we won’t be able to cross those walls of flame either. … No, wait.”

A message reached the smartphone on the stretcher.

“Sure. Most casinos have a separate exit using an underground route. Those straight-line tunnels never intersect, but look something like a spider web when all viewed together.”

…In that case, not even all of this would be enough. What if the gels fled underground to escape the walls of flames?

I had my doubts, but it was possible the military(?) was not done yet. The gels seemed unable to eat rubber or plastic, so it was possible the military had generally divided up the city so they could send in flamethrower units in thick protective suits to spread the fire inside buildings and underground.

But could fire actually “kill” the gels?

It was true they avoided fire, but we had yet to see one finished off by it. What if this widespread burning with incendiary bombs and flamethrowers made the military think they had won, but once they waited for the fires to die down and tried to check on the remains, the gels were revived?

“A 10 minute walk is within the same block. We shouldn’t need to search out any of the secret tunnels.”

Whatever the case, we had to hurry to the indicated casino’s underground parking lot. If the rich person’s surgery truck was buried in rubble or enveloped in flames, we wouldn’t be able to treat Anastasia.

Once we carried the stretcher into a narrow alley, the lack of the fiery glow left our surroundings very dark. I was worried about my footing. And perhaps due to the heated wind blowing through, I quickly began sweating. I felt an oppressive wall of heat.

The heat created by burning the city struck my face in the form of wind. It felt as unpleasant as being forced to rub my cheek against a burned corpse.

“Shh. Stop, Onii-chan.”

While taking the lead with the other end of the stretcher, Ayumi twisted her hips and faced forward as she spoke. She whispered as she viewed the rubble-strewn road dyed in shades of red and black that was visible beyond the alley exit.

“There’s something moving behind the third pile of rubble there.”

I gulped. Who was it? A person, or a gel? Either way, our safety was not guaranteed. Anyone who had survived this long was a dangerous sort of person who had made harsh decisions to ensure their survival. …Not that we were any different. And while lugging around the heavy stretcher, we would have a hard time fighting back or fleeing if whoever it was held plain hostility for us.

Which side were they on?

Even my heartbeat seemed too loud as I desperately viewed that out-of-reach area as if to make it my own.

And finally, the figure crept out from behind cover.

“!? A gel!!”

This was bad. Ayumi and Erika were Archenemies, but they would only have their arms and legs eaten if they tried to defeat this gel barehanded. But could we escape while carrying a heavy stretcher!?

“I’m…fine. Truth, you hurry up and…run away…”

“Quiet, Anastasia. I don’t want to hear any more out of you.”

However, Erika spoke to me slowly and gently while carrying the unconscious Class Rep on her back.

“Calm down, Satori-kun. Just settle down.”

"…?"

I was puzzled, but then the gel made its next move.

That red slime was supposedly blocking our path, but it crawled off in a completely different direction.

"The gels pursue their prey by sensing the movements of the air by digesting the small particles in the air via their surface area, right?" said Erika. "With everything burning after the bombing, the air currents have grown complex and all the soot and smoke has filled the air with far more particles than normal. I doubt their senses are working properly."

Oh, right.

This was a hellish scene where orange-glowing tornadoes passed by after an abnormal updraft locally swallowed up some flames. This environment was beyond any naturally occurring on earth.

"Onii-chan, let's take this slowly. Nice and slow. We can sneak past it right now."

"…"

I could not carelessly respond.

I couldn't breathe, like my throat was clogged. All I could do was obey her instructions. Even if its senses were messed up, the gel was still well within eyesight. It felt like running into a giant bear in the forest and having it refuse to go away. If it changed direction on some kind of whim, we would all be wiped out.

We would normally never take this path. Whether some unexploded ordnance was going to detonate or not, you wouldn't want to approach it if you could avoid it.

…But that only applied when Anastasia's life was not in danger.

I gulped and matched my pace to Ayumi's as we slowly carried the stretcher. We walked over the unsteady footing of rubble. It was something deep in my mind instead of my vision that made me feel dizzy. No matter how far we walked, I could still feel the grim reaper clinging to my back.

"Looks like…it's fine."

Erika finally said that after looking back.

I released the breath that had been caught in my throat the entire time, but this was no guarantee. It was all over if a red slime suddenly rose up from the gaps in the rubble below our feet. And this was a large road, so we could also be hit by the bombing.

Reality was heartless, so we could run across a literal dead end at any moment.

Not even the world's most powerful air force had done a perfect job. The gels had been driven back, but they were still crawling around Las Vegas.

"Pant, pant."

"Satori-kun, watch your breathing. I know this can't be easy, but if you take too many deep breaths, you'll hyperventilate and rob yourself of the ability to think."

"Then what am I supposed to do…?"

"It's relatively easy to control if you synchronize your walking pace with your breathing rhythm. Although to be honest, that's a Bright Cross technique."

"…"

For some reason, I couldn't immediately accept that advice. Did a skinny guy like me really have that kind of sweaty stubbornness? It honestly surprised even me.

"User, you have arrived at your destination."

"?"

"This is the Desert Dream casino. It may be hard to tell since the top half of the building collapsed and the electronic sign has fallen down."

It was like something out of a war movie.

It had likely been a high-rise building with things like a theatre or mall inside, but more than half of it had broken off and covered the smaller buildings with rubble. All of the external walls were scorched black. The sparks bursting from the ground likely came from what had once been the electronic sign.

I would never have known what it was without being told.

"Maxwell, where's the entrance leading underground?"

"The shortest route would be to enter the partially collapsed building and head down the stairs. There is also a slope behind the building for cars to directly enter the underground parking lot, but based on its location, it is buried beneath all that rubble."

We had to risk our lives to the very end.

It wasn't just the gels and bombing. Our surroundings were overflowing with all kinds of death.

With glass shards crunching below our feet, we entered the building. It was already a dark night, but the building's wiring must have been severed because it had almost no lights on.

"…An electric fire could start at any moment."

"The gas lines are also a worry," added Maxwell.

Not even the emergency exit lights were on, so my smartphone's backlight came in handy. With some advice from my vampire sister who, as a denizen of the night, had excellent night vision, I managed to find the stairs down to the parking lot located to the right of the metal detector gate.

The door was bent and wouldn't open, but Erika raised her wonderfully beautiful leg and performed a kick with the sole of her foot while still carrying the Class Rep on her back. The entire metal door bent and flew inwards.

"…"

While supporting the stretcher with both hands, I twisted my head to look down the stairs. We could not relax even after coming this far. It was game over if a bunch of gels had taken refuge here to escape the flames.

"The gels react to disturbances in the air. Since there was no reaction even after Miss Erika kicked down the door, it is unlikely any are hiding on the stairs."

"Unlikely isn't impossible, though. Let's get going."

The gels disliked heat. If anyone had had a free hand, it would have helped to grab a metal pipe from the burning wreckage to use in place of a red hot poker, but we could not be picky here.

We descended the dark stairs one cautious step at a time. After reaching the last step, I took a quiet breath. Then I passed through the door and entered a large space.

It was an underground parking lot.

“Maxwell. Where exactly is it located? Although I imagine the security cameras and intranet must be down given the state of the building.”

“Sure. That is not a problem. I can determine the location using footage from the vehicle in question’s drive recorder. It is the medical truck on the 4th column and 15th row. It is the size of a delivery truck and the mirrors of the surrounding vehicles show that the side bears a cross design with two snakes wrapped around it. Use that to search.”

“Asclepius, huh?”

But triumphantly showing off that trivia was of no use in an emergency. We had to get to the surgery truck to save Anastasia.

Half of…no, about a third of the underground parking lot was buried in rubble because the ceiling had collapsed.

The surgery truck had just barely escaped harm. Some pebble-sized fragments must have hit it because the windshield was white with small cracks and the chassis was dented.

“To breathe life into the medical equipment in the back, you must first head to the driver’s seat and start the engine.”

“Understood. Anastasia, we’re going to gently lower you.”

“…Honestly. Just do what…you want with me.”

“That isn’t something a girl should say so readily. Ayumi.”

“Got it. Gently, right?”

I lowered Anastasia’s stretcher to the floor to free up my hands. Released from that burden, I felt a tingling pain in my arms. I also made sure to duck down and check below the truck for any red

gels.

I of course did not have the key to the surgery truck.

“Maxwell, what about the door lock? Cars these days generally use EM or IR right?”

“No. Perhaps because it is a medical device, it is more strictly locked than a normal vehicle. The one lock requires both a digital and analog key, so I alone cannot unlock it.”

“Oh, I see.”

I grabbed a piece of concrete rubble the size of a phone book and smashed the driver’s side window. Glass scattered everywhere. I discarded the block, reached inside the window, and manually unlocked the door.

Incidentally, the alarm did not go off. The windshield was broken back when the rubble had pushed in, so the alarm may have done all its blaring back then.

“Satori-kun, why does your manliness seem to increase five-fold in an emergency?”

That made me a little worried about how Erika normally saw me, but I didn’t have time to question her. I brushed the glass shards from the seat and then climbed in.

“Maxwell, what should I do now? How do I ignite the engine? The battery alone won’t be enough, will it?”

“Downloading diagram from Excess’s development server. Follow my instructions and remove the cover below the steering wheel.”

Cars these days would not start up just by connecting some torn wires like in an old police drama. Everything was controlled by

encrypted signals, so the system would actually lock down if it received an improper current.

But things changed if you connected the internal wiring to a terminal with good program control.

“Wow, I didn’t expect it to match the smartphone’s connection port so perfectly.”

“That would be a result of looking ahead to the possibility of a fully self-driving vehicle. I can enter the vehicle’s system through the maintenance cable.”

When you turned the steering wheel, it did not directly exert a force on the tires. Instead, an electric signal told a servo (a type of motor) to exert the force on the tires. As you’ve probably already guessed, you could do whatever you wanted if you messed with the program in between. This could be used in a dangerous way much more easily than attaching a bomb below the car. Since these things were AI controlled with their ports fully opened to the internet, it kind of felt like the world wanted to be destroyed.

With a loud roar, the truck shook and the headlights activated. The digital displays for the speedometer and fuel gauge appeared in the darkness.

“What will you do, Maxwell?”

“With the engine ignited, the connection is no longer necessary. I would prefer to stay with you.”

I needed Maxwell to control the remote operation station. I pulled the connection cable from my smartphone, hopped out of the driver’s seat, and made my way to the back.

When I threw open the double doors, I found a thick but

translucent plastic sheet partition and lots of high-tech equipment including robot arms and computers. Overall, it looked like a dentist's chair that had been upgraded to an SSR card.

"Okay, Maxwell, I need your help. I have no idea what to do. Before even getting to the surgery itself, I don't know how to professionally sterilize anything."

"Sure. I have analyzed the manual and undergone repetition learning. I have contacted the slave medical system and taken master privileges. Please follow my instructions, user."

"It's all up to you. Save my good friend."

"Sure."

I honestly don't remember much of what happened after that. It was a lot like entering an unnecessarily luxurious multi-purpose smart kitchen and making an unfamiliar meal while viewing a cooking site on my smartphone. The sterilization level was less like that of an operating room where not even a loose hair was allowed and more like an emergency outpatient clinic for patients needing immediate care. Plus, Anastasia had a piece of rebar piercing her and that meant we could not remove her clothes, so there was only so much we could do.

Erika, Ayumi, and the Class Rep remained outside the truck. There wasn't much space inside with all the equipment and there was the sterilization issue.

But there was one thing that was burned into my mind.

And it of course was the thing I least wanted to remember.

"I am prepared to stop the bleeding, apply stitches, and provide a transfusion. Please pull out the rebar that is plugging the wound. I

cannot continue if you do not.”

“Pull it out? Me!? I-I thought you were going to do it all!”

“No. The surgical station’s arm is designed for precision, so it is poorly suited for this kind of heavy lifting.”

“What about anesthesia? Anastasia is still awake!”

“No. We do not have time to slowly apply general anesthesia. Also, placing her under anesthesia in her current weakened state could put her life at greater risk.”

“C-can’t we at least do some localized anesthesia…?”

“A lot of time has passed since she began bleeding. We do not have time to wait for anesthesia to take effect.”

I had to grab and pull on the rebar pierced straight through the 11-year-old girl’s belly.

I felt dizzy the entire time.

“Fortunately, the rebar itself was not bent, so it has no large protrusions,” explained Maxwell. “If you pull it straight back, slowly but surely, you will not harm the surrounding tissue.”

But when I actually grabbed it and applied force, I felt a horribly soft resistance. A tremor ran through my fingertips. Clenching my teeth was not enough to stop them from chattering.

“…Ha ha. Don’t cry, Truth. There’s a girl right here.”

Anastasia’s will seemed far stronger than mine as she lay helpless on that high-tech chopping block.

“No matter how this turns out, I’m still thankful. So don’t hesitate.

We'll be friends no matter what happens."

I felt like I was doing something terrible. Like I was supposed to be saving someone yet was actually tearing them apart on the inside.

Still, I managed to pull the finger-thick rebar all the way out.

The thread of tension snapped.

I fell back onto my butt with the horrific bloody rebar still in my grasp.

My smartphone vibrated to warn me.

"I will now begin stopping the bleeding and applying stitches. There is no time to remove Anastasia's clothing. I will need to tear a portion of her silk camisole, so please acquire ex-post-facto approval."

"Yeah…"

"I will perform the surgery, but it would help if you could change Anastasia's orientation per my instructions."

My memories ended there. I assume I changed gloves and re-sterilized myself after touching the floor and then became a clumsy machine controlled by Maxwell rather than a human. I wouldn't have been able to bear it if I hadn't just given myself over to the series of instructions: right to left, top to bottom.

However.

"Wait a moment. User, this is somewhat odd."

"What, Maxwell!? Please don't tell me there's been some kind of trouble! We've already removed the rebar plugging her wound!"

“No, there has been no trouble with the surgical procedure and this is not an accident. It is unexpected, but it is a welcome miscalculation.”

?

What was Maxwell saying???

“Removing the rebar should have caused a great quantity of bleeding, but there has been an unexpectedly small amount. This would normally not be possible.”

“Did it just so happen to miss any major blood vessels or organs?”

“No. Given the location, that would not be possible. Also, the bleeding is already coming to a stop. This recovery speed would be impossible for a human.”

“Wait! You don’t mean…”

Anastasia was still conscious.

But she looked up at me and then turned her head to look away. That sort of confirmed it for me.

Maxwell provided the answer.

“Sure. It is extremely likely that Anastasia is an Archenemy.”

Maxwell mechanically continued the work.

I felt dizzy seeing those inhuman fingers push inside someone’s body, pierce a needle into them, and pass a thread through.

Once the work was complete, Maxwell covered the entire wound with a large piece of gauze.

“The full task has been completed as requested. Once I have confirmed her condition is stable, I will inject some morphine into the affected region. That will complete the surgery, but it may have been unnecessary from the beginning.”

“…”

It was done.

Anastasia was alive.

I could hear her impudent comments once more.

…This should have been the time to shed tears of joy, but my mind was full of distractions, telling me just how pathetic the human named Amatsu Satori was.

Anastasia smiled a little from the operating table.

I recalled what she had said during the surgery: No matter how this turns out, I’m still thankful. We’ll be friends no matter what happens.

She probably hadn’t intended to deceive me.

She simply hadn’t had a chance to tell me and had it revealed on the operating table. Just like when someone with a secret navel piercing got appendicitis.

“…Tell me, Anastasia.”

“It’s Maiden. Darn, I guess I couldn’t hide it. If it was something I could just tie a rag around at the scene, I could have passed it off as a miraculous survival, but there was nothing I could do with this professional operating table.”

She maintained her unnecessarily feminine Japanese even when

speaking self-deprecatingly.

“I’ll tell you everything.”

“Okay.”

“But let me ask one selfish question first. Truth, are we still friends?”

“What kind of question is that?”

I spat out the question.

And when the 11-year-old girl’s eyes opened wide, I continued.

“Of course we are. If we weren’t, why would I carry you across a bombed and gel-covered city and enter a half-destroyed building that could collapse at any moment?”

Anastasia said nothing for a while. But seeing the look on her face was enough.

No matter what secret she had and even if she wasn’t even human, there was no way she was an enemy.

“My handle is Maiden. I borrowed it from a certain Archenemy.”

She finally began her explanation.

Her shoulders looked a lot less tense than before.

“The Silky. They’re Archenemies that reside in European houses. They like to wear silk dresses, help out with all the housework, and protect the home, but they will drive out any master they don’t like even if it gets them hurt. Well, Japan has something similar, right? What was it called? A Zashiki Warashi? Think of them as something like that.”

A European Zashiki Warashi.

Yes, someone like that might indeed look indistinguishable from a human, just like my vampire older sister and zombie little sister.

But a silk dress, huh?

That would explain why she made sure her camisole and miniskirt were both silk.

“Why did you hide it?”

“Because it’s embarrassing. I mean, being a maid? That’s not my style.”

The exhaustion showed on her face as she made that sulking comment.

This meant she was an 11-year-old European maid and an immortal genius hacker who attended college. There was so much there it was almost laughable.

“Also, we need to take into consideration that this is happening in Vegas, our hideout. Truth, I am well aware that you are *our* ally. When you challenged the Bright Cross all on your own, it was more than just me who felt a jolt of electricity down their spine. Amatsu Satori is undoubtedly a savior and a hero. For *us* anyway.”

I doubted she was talking about hackers or crackers when she said “our” and “us”.

She meant a close yet distant world to which a human like me could never belong.

“But nothing is absolute in the internet society. I am well aware of your skill, Truth, but the States are on the cutting edge of intercepting communications. I wanted to be extra careful, so I

didn't dare mention this in an email or video chat."

"What? What were you doing here in Las Vegas?"

The answer could change the meaning behind the appearance of the gels and the military bombing.

Then Anastasia, that close neighbor of an Archenemy, spoke.

"Hey, Truth. Archenemies can outdo a human individually, but we are overwhelmingly outdone by humans when it comes to overall numbers. In that case, it isn't physical strength we need to protect ourselves. How can we build a natural safe zone where a small number of people control a much larger number? How can we secretly steal resource from the entire human population without showing any sign of conflict at all? Everything needed for that was gathered here in Vegas. What do you think those things were?"

"…?"

My mind went blank for a moment.

And then a possibility occurred to me.

"It can't be."

"Money and information, right?" Anastasia grinned despite how pale she still was. "Do you know what book first mentioned the concept of paper money? It was not a politician that proposed it. A certain author released the idea into the world using the words of a fictional demon named Mephistopheles. The demon suggested creating documents giving someone the ownership rights to expected, but not yet discovered, treasures."

"…"

"There is a giant computer that has taken that name:

Mephistopheles. It is a unique supercomputer that provides centralized management of all electronically controlled casinos, machines, and gambling results in Vegas."

[confidential] Excerpt from the Editor's Postscript for a List of 100 Great People who Built the Current World [storage A51]

The key to this year's selection was their response to the internet society.

In addition to major search engines, online stores, and leading AI researchers working on self-driving cars, actors and athletes' social media activity cannot be ignored and even traditional craftsmen use the internet to find sponsors and successors. It is a necessary part of life even for fields that seem entirely unrelated.

Information is very important for the financial field as well, so it was refreshing to see how the seemingly calm and collected candidates were surprisingly dedicated to gathering information.

Schools, prisons, hospitals, and corporations.

In any organizational structure where the few rule over the many, the upper levels must have unilateral access to the lower levels' information. That may have finally expanded to a global scale thanks to the internet.

Classification: A

The magazine’s method of determining influence from the effect on things like stock prices requires further attention.

Chapter 6

Anastasia and I were alone.

A rich person's surgery truck was parked in the underground parking lot of a casino that could collapse at any moment. Inside there, she gave me the answers while still lying down.

"Wall Street is the biggest name in money, but it's so important that there are a lot of watchful eyes there. Enough so that they make movies about the people there. They're the stereotypical villains in the States. It would be difficult to infiltrate Wall Street without anyone there noticing."

"So you made Las Vegas your base?"

"Yes. After all, 20% of all money on the planet passes through this city. And there are tons of huge servers for verifying cards. With slots, roulette, and video poker, there are a lot of electronically controlled games. There are some casinos that don't even use dealers to shuffle the cards. To prevent cheating. Think of it like a fully automatic mahjong table. By controlling this city and influencing the gambling wins and losses, you can alter the exchange rate of the dollar and the value of gold. That's the purpose behind Mephistopheles. The watchful eyes with too much time on their hands will be focused on Wall Street like always while we gradually influence the world economy from Vegas. This was the kind of underhanded method needed for the few to defeat the many, Truth."

It was a ridiculous concept.

And it was on a very American scale.

“How many people are involved in this plan? They’re Archenemies too, right?”

“Hey, Truth. Vegas is an extremely unnatural city built in the middle of the desert. No one thinks about the local population here. The people are always on the move, so anyone could move in or out at any time. That too makes it more convenient than Wall Street. It’s known as a racial salad bowl, but New York tends to be tough on outsiders. It’s hard for newcomers to work their way in very deep.”

“Wait a second, Anastasia. You’re getting sidetracked.”

“No, I’m not.” the 11-year-old girl grinned. “Half of the people in Las Vegas are made up of *us*.”

I was dumbfounded.

I lived in the same house as my vampire older sister and zombie little sister like it was normal. My stepmom was apparently Lilith, so my family had more Archenemies than humans.

“We did it by gradually having more and more move in. People frequently move to and from Vegas for financial reasons, so it’s hard to notice this sort of thing happening.”

But an entire city?

And if they had reached 50%, then it had to be pretty much everyone excluding the tourists there for easy money and the people like Herbal Science. The city had more tourists than residents, so they had to have nearly filled the entire resident group.

A large city taken over by reversing the population ratio was a shocking revelation. But how shocking it would it be for a normal person with no real connection to Archenemies?

“Then there are…nearly 2 million Archenemies living here in secret?”

Not even Romania, holy land of vampire legends, or Haiti, origin of zombies, was on that level. Archenemies were accepted by general society, but in a lot of cases, only if they remained a minority.

But to look at it in reverse, this meant the human casualties from all this had been half what I had thought.

Was that a relief?

Like hell it was.

“We were supposed to change the entire world from here, but that ended when those gels attacked on the ground and the bombs fell from the sky.”

“!? That’s right! What are those gels!? Are those some of the Archenemies who came to Las Vegas?”

“Truth. Did your precious sisters never tell you this?” Anastasia sighed. “There is no Archenemy like these gels. In fact, slime types are hard to find in any myths or legends. Those are more like UFOs or cryptids than fantasy creatures.”

“They’re not…Archenemies?”

“Not a naturally-occurring variety, at least.”

Wait.

Wait, wait.

Las Vegas had been secretly taken over by Archenemies. The gels had attacked there. And then the military had bombed the city as a forceful solution.

Didn't something smell really fishy about that?

"If the humans had realized the truth behind Vegas, they never would have had a better chance," said Anastasia. "They could drop all those bombs while claiming they were taking Vegas back from the Archenemy gels and actually be bombing us Archenemies. None of the housewives in their living rooms would notice. What will people think when their cable TV channels only show them monstrous gels attacking humanoid silhouettes and silhouettes bursting into flames as they fled along with the monsters?"

It would look like humans were being eaten by the gels.

It would look like humans were burning.

…It would look like Archenemies were wronging humans when it was really the humans bombing the Archenemies.

The humans were the attackers, but no one would realize that. They would see themselves as the victims and end up criticizing the Archenemies. Like they were whipping a corpse.

"Then did the military make those gels? To give themselves a justification to bomb Las Vegas!?"

"I was taken aback at first, but now that I think about it, it makes sense. Hey, do you know what state Las Vegas is in, Truth?"

She gave a stiff smile.

And she made the world's worst joke.

"Nevada. Given the location, the answer is obvious. That bomber formation flew here from the Area 51 airbase infamous for UFO research and alien autopsies."

They were more like UFOs or cryptids than fantasy creatures.

This was the true origin of those bizarre Archenemies that could not possibly be natural.

It sounded ridiculous and nonsensical, but we had no theory that was more convincing.

Thinking back, why had the military used incendiary bombs from the very beginning? How had they known the gels were weak to heat? This should have been their first direct confrontation with them, so they should have started off with machineguns or tanks.

The answer was obvious.

If they had created them, of course they would know how to deal with them.

I ended up holding my head in my hands.

“I can’t believe this!!”

“A world famous tourist destination was wiped off the map by Archenemy gels. Sending out bombers was the only way to resolve the situation. If they interrupt a boring baseball game with that emergency news, there will be a backlash against Archenemies around the world. It’s the perfect turn of events for the human supremacists.”

This was insane.

It was nuts.

It was true Anastasia’s group may have gone too far. They may have tried to manipulate others in excessive pursuit of their own interests. But who would go this far to fight back? Humans and Archenemies together, that was 4 million people who laughed and cried just like us. Why did this have to happen to that many people!?

Because they weren't human?

Because they were different?

Everyone was eaten and no one remained.

Was that really worth going to this extent!? And half of the victims were the humans these people claimed to love so much!!

"We have to do something."

"What can we possibly do now, Truth?"

"We somehow prove where the gels came from! 4 million people were swallowed up and burned alive to create an age where they could throw even more stones at Archenemies around the world? To hell with that! I *will* put a stop to this! Otherwise, history might as well have ended here!!"

Anastasia laughed quietly on the operating table.

But it was not meant to mock me.

"You're talking about taking on the military."

"I know."

"And based on the email sent to Herbal Science, the name Amatsu Yurina is mixed up in this. I can't imagine how she's infected Congress or the Air Force, though."

There was that too.

She was also known as Archenemy Lilith. It might seem odd for an Archenemy to attack other Archenemies, but the top of the Bright Cross had been Valkyrie Karen. Just as humans killed other humans, Archenemies would kill each other. What category the two sides

belonged to did not guarantee anyone's safety.

But I said it anyway.

"How can I let this happen?"

"That settles it then."

Either due to the transfusion or the toughness of a Silky, Anastasia could finally move again, so she lightly clapped her hands together.

"If we're to investigate the gels, Area 51 seems most likely. But that's the world's most strictly guarded Air Force base. Officially, they claim it's because they do Air Force-related research and develop for things like stealth aircraft. It won't be easy to get in. Even with Maxwell's help, I doubt you can force your way into their servers."

I wasn't a legendary ninja or spy, so I never even considered donning black and sneaking into the desert base.

"If the gels were spread from Area 51, they can't just leave them out here. If they don't put an end to this, those things will move on to other cities."

"I'm not sure they'll crawl out into the desert when they hate the heat so much, but it is possible they would cross the desert at night or crawl through the water pipes. Still, they've trapped them with the bombing, haven't they?"

"How are they going to confirm the success or failure of that? From satellites? From the bombers' cameras? That wouldn't be enough. Cameras and sensors from above aren't good for viewing a city filled with dark smoke and heated wind. They have to have observers here in Las Vegas."

"Ah."

“And those observers must have a large communicator that gives them a hotline back their boss. Anastasia, didn’t you say before that America is on the cutting edge of intercepting communications? The different factions there must be working to trip each other up, so if they want to avoid having someone as unscrupulous as themselves catch on, they’ll never be using a normal internet connection. I don’t know if it’s a military satellite or an AWACS, but they must have a dedicated hotline.”

“Then if we get those observers’ communicator…”

“We have a direct line to their boss’s throat. With that and our combined skills, we have everything we need to pry open Area 51’s servers. If we pretend to be the observers, we should be able to send an email to their boss that infects them with a virus. From there, it’s the same as a corporate server. We get all the detailed data on the gels and then make them pay.”

“Truth, you’re the best! You really should wear a shining sword on your hip!!”

“I’d rather have a flying time machine built by an eccentric professor.”

But the other side would of course be aware of the risk presented by sending observers to the scene. They would have chosen a team made up of their greatest elites. They would not be easy to find in the first place and I had no idea how we could beat them in a direct confrontation.

After all, this small team had entered a den packed with 2 million Archenemies, half the city’s population.

And they would have had to protect themselves during the gel attack.

They had to be skilled indeed if they had volunteered for a mission like that. We had a vampire and a zombie and we were up against humans, but that might not be enough here.

We could not view this optimistically.

If we were going to do this we had to risk our lives for it. And that included my life.

“I’ll speak with Erika and Ayumi. We’re about to be busy.”

“Um, Truth, I can-…”

“Even if you’re an Archenemy, you had a chunk of metal through your gut. I can’t exactly take you into danger like that. You can provide logistical support.”

“Why do you only treat me like a girl at times like this?”

“Don’t be silly. You’re always a girl. And a pretty one at that.”

“Kh… A-anyway, I’m going with you! No running off without me!”

It was time for the finale.

I hadn’t arrived in time for the beginning and 4 million people had been sacrificed all around me.

But I could at least clean up afterwards.

[confidential] About Chicken Squad [storage A51]

Most people tend to think Air Force personnel mainly pilots aircraft

such as fighters and transport planes, but the actual pilots are less than 10% of the whole. With maintenance and inspection, base guards, fuel transportation, radar operators, and flight control officers, a large number of personnel are needed to support the aerial infrastructure.

Among those are some men known as flightless birds. Most ground duty in the Air Force is done around the base, but they are the exception that heads further afield while armed with guns.

Surface support such as IR guidance and GPS markers is generally handled by the elites of the army or marines.

Thus, the flightless birds only swiftly infiltrate the scene for delicate issues when the effort of inter-branch cooperation cannot be afforded. Needless to say, they are under a lot of pressure from the higher ups.

When this Chicken Squad heads out, a bombing mission has already left the bounds of any proper military plan. They carry a lifeline of political influence that is reliant on the White House. And that is why they cannot worry about appearances. They will prioritize the timetable above all else and guide their given bombing mission to success. They are a giant gear used to preserve a world beyond simple good and evil. That is the best way of describing their way of life.

The above is a rumor being spread at bars near the base, but it has been intentionally allowed to spread. It is decent camouflage for the truth.

Chapter 7

We were in the parking lot below the Desert Dream casino.

The outside had been ravaged by the bombs, but we had already escaped from below a casino during the gel attack. We searched around and found what we were looking for: a secret underground passageway protected by a thick metal door, perhaps meant for transporting money or as an escape route if robbers showed up.

“Looks like the damage really didn’t reach down here.”

We could not bring Anastasia out onto the bumpy rubble so soon after surgery, but I also would have been worried if we left her in the half-collapsed underground parking lot. On that front, the underground passageway looked like it would protect her from the incendiary bombs and from being buried alive. Plus, the door was airtight, so it didn’t seem any surviving gels got in.

“Anastasia, stay here. We’ll be right back.”

“Be quick. I might email you for no real reason, but don’t laugh, okay?”

“Also, I brought a huge bottle I found in one of the cars. It’s still sealed, so it should be safe to drink. You need water, right?”

“Glass Gazer, hm? That’s kind of hard. I prefer my water a little softer.”

I could only really tell the difference between tap water and mineral water, so I wasn’t sure what that meant. Erika could be picky about tea, so she might understand.

Even in the sealed underground passageway, I could contact Maxwell back in Japan, so it seemed to have a decent wireless setup. They may have laid out metal tape along the walls to pick up the signal from the surface, like someone extending their TV antenna line into their house. It made sense since this was a secret underground passageway. If they couldn't know what was going on outside, they could open the door right into an ambush.

"Maxwell, change the door lock's number once we leave."

"Sure. Being overprotective is probably about right given the situation."

With that exchange, we returned to hellish Las Vegas.

The wind seemed to broil my entire face.

It was supposedly pretty late at night, but the sky was even more orange than before. That showed just how thoroughly the city had been burned.

Where were the gels? How far had the bombing gone? Overlooking the answers to those questions could get us all wiped out at once.

"Ayumi, be careful."

"Y'know, Onii-chan, I'm not stupid enough to burn myself here."

"Not that. I think Satori-kun is worried about unexploded ordnance buried in the rubble with this citywide fireworks parade underway."

"Fuguu!?"

But there were some elite military observers somewhere in Las Vegas. They would be blending into the background even with all the gels and incendiary bombs everywhere.

“Nn, hh…”

That was when the Class Rep groaned while Erika carried her on her back.

“Good morning, Class Rep. Although it’s not morning. And this burning hellscape is hardly my idea of good.”

“Eh? Eh? Satori-kun? Uheh!? Wait, what is going on!?”

The Class Rep cried out like she had entered cold sleep to see what things were like a millennium into the future and awoke to find civilization had returned to the stone age. It was a natural reaction and it cleansed my heart. The Class Rep really was the best. She had a way of calming me. She was so cute I just wanted to do a little dance.

“Fuguu. More importantly, Onii-chan, how are you going to find these professional observers? They’re probably the kind of person who would stay still for three full days in the jungle with a sniper rifle and a diaper if you told them to wait there.”

“Maxwell, can you access real-time satellite footage? A civilian satellite service is fine.”

“I could not earlier, but now I can access it quite smoothly.”

“Oh?” said Erika. “I would have thought the military would throw their weight around and cut off all access to things like that.”

“They must want images of their bombing of justice slaying the evil Archenemy gels. Enough so that they’re willing to set up a mirror site. More importantly, Maxwell, footage from above speeds things up. Compare the timing of the bombing with the images and search for a spot that hasn’t had a single bomb dropped on it. That’s where the observers will have their bunker.”

“Analyzing… The results are not promising. Finding a specific location would be difficult. However, there does seem to be a blank area slowly moving with the storm of bombs, like the eye of a hurricane.”

“Hmm. So they’re staying on the move instead of using a fixed bunker? Okay, Maxwell. That eye of the storm is where the observers are. Calculate out a predicted route so we can lie in wait and contact them.”

“Sure. However, these are elites, so there is a very high risk of them breaking through even if you know their location.”

“I know that.”

The military was a phrase I really only heard in movies and I had no idea what kind of equipment they would have in reality. At the very least, I knew stuffing manga magazines below my clothes wouldn’t be enough.

“Anyway, let’s go. Erika, Ayumi, and Class Rep too.”

“Fine, but will you explain what’s going on while we move!?”

We started walking through rubble-strewn Las Vegas as the Class Rep raised her voice to yell.

The first wave of bombing must have been complete because they did not seem to be dropping bombs like crazy anymore. I could see several silhouettes in a V-shape flying through the burning night sky and they were dropping bombs every so often, but the intensity had clearly dropped.

“Wait, are you serious…!?”

When she heard the situation, the Class Rep crossed a pile of rubble blocking the way and viewed the transformed cityscape. I

couldn’t blame her. Anyone would be at a loss of words after being dragged into this massive farce. And there was some monumental idiot who had caused all of this.

“Satori-kun, a lull in the bombing isn’t necessarily a good thing. It might mean the military is moving to the next phase of their operation.”

“I know. They might send in a largescale ground unit that will pry open the door to Anastasia’s underground passageway, or they might withdraw the observers. Either way, this is a race against time.”

Fortunately, we had Maxwell to navigate us to our destination, so we didn’t have to worry about wandering in circles through the razed city.

“Warning: you are 400 meters from your target. That is barely within range of the standard assault rifle. Even with the intense flames in the area, you should be cautious about using your smartphone’s backlight. Be careful.”

“…”

Maxwell’s support was crucial, so I covered as much of the screen with my palm as I could and crouched down on the spot.

Upwind and downwind…probably didn’t matter. With all the blazes started by the incendiary bombs, the air was expanding and sending burning winds blowing every which way. Even a trained police dog would only detect a scorched smell.

“A-are you going to keep going, Onii-chan?”

Ayumi sounded a little frightened.

400 meters. I looked across the burned city and a half-collapsed

theater was the only real option for the observers. Las Vegas was known for its casinos, but it was also counted as a holy ground for movies.

No matter how much I squinted, I could not see anyone there.

Could they see us?

Were we already in their sights?

I felt like I was in the middle of a jungle minefield. While staying absolutely still, I spoke to my smartphone.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“The bombers and the observers must be linked somehow to make sure they don’t bomb their own people. Can you figure out how?”

“As far as I can tell by switching camera modes, they are not using IR reflective tape. I have detected an EM signal sent from the surface once every 5 seconds. It is likely relaying their position on an online map.”

“Those observers are more careless than I expected. Maxwell, let’s rewrite their map. We’ll lure them out below the bombs.”

“No. This is the world’s strongest air force. I am not powerful enough to break in.”

“Don’t be so sure. Anastasia.”

“Nweh? What? What? Do you need something, Truth?”

She may have no longer cared about being called Maiden or a hacker. My persistence had paid off.

“You mentioned hacking into a military missile silo earlier, right? All the way to Phase 2. If that wasn’t a bluff, then I need your help.”

“Who do you think I am? If not for the manual key in the way, I could have dropped a nuke from a bomber.”

Erika and Ayumi exchanged a glance.

It was exactly those bombers which were flying around overhead.

“I want to cut off the link between bombers and observers to lure out the observers hiding in the background. Can you think of a way to mess with their map?”

“I see. How far away are you? You can use tethering, right? If your smartphone’s signal is in range of the target, you can do some fun things.”

“No,” said Maxwell. “Based on the scale of the satellite images, the bombers are remaining at an altitude of greater than 9000 meters. They have nearly 10,000 meters of vertical distance plus the horizontal distance you have to worry about. A mobile-standard signal cannot cover that distance. And forcing off the limiters greatly increases the risk of damaging the hardware.”

“Not that. We’re about 400 meters from the observers. Targeting them should be fine.”

Anastasia sounded exasperated too.

“Again, can’t you just use feet or miles?”

“Look up the conversion yourself.”

“Fine. But in that case, let’s rewrite the map of the nearby observers. The large communicator one of them is probably wearing on their back is one thing, but their handheld devices are

probably normal Pearphones or Bioroids in shock-resistant cases. They truly believe they're untouchable as long as they have a contract with a major company that runs ads on TV, no matter how many times we hackers try to warn them."

"Anyway, can you handle the observers' map?"

"Yes. Even if they're in a safe place, they'll panic and get out of there if they don't know that. Let me sync with your phone and then give me a 30 second countdown. Your cute hound will drive the hares out from the bushes, so keep your eyes open and pay careful attention, Truth."

We had pulled the trigger of zeroes and ones.

It really was like wild birds taking flight from a tall thicket. Those men in black night camo had so perfectly blended into the background, but it was almost amusing how readily they appeared now. They had made their mistake.

"Ha ha! Of all things, they're using the Winners Phones that are affected by every virus in the world!? I mean, the base OS itself is often called an official virus that steals your personal info!!"

"Do you have a grudge against Winners or something!?"

"The tracing program I was writing was just about killed when they swapped out my entire OS without asking! Winners can go to hell! Intellectual property is a valuable resource, you know!?"

But I did not have time to listen to someone's one-sided grudge. And unfortunately, I doubted anyone was going to accept hacking tools as intellectual property.

"Gh."

It happened suddenly.

An unbelievably powerful impact hit my hips from the side. I seriously thought my entire body had been bent into a sideways V-shape. It took me a while to realize that idiot Ayumi had used her zombie strength to tackle me.

“Bh!?”

Something flashed in the distance and wind roared right by my face. Then I heard a dry sound hit my eardrums.

A gunshot!? They suddenly shot at us!!

My vision blurred so much I thought my neck was going to snap, but I just barely managed to see Erika leap the other way with the Class Rep in her arms.

Both pairs escaped the bullets by hiding behind rubble.

But it wasn’t over yet. They put infiltration and stealth above all else. If they had fired a shot, it meant they were going to silence us through death no matter what it took.

“What do you think they’ll do next?”

“They failed at 400 meters. That’s all this means, Onii-chan. So they’ll adjust their assumptions and move close enough to finish us off for sure.”

I was Japanese through and through, so I honestly wasn’t too familiar with gunfights. I did have a disaster environment simulator that could reproduce anything, but while I had tried out UFOs and giant robots, I hadn’t done much with FPSs where macho men ran around with lots of firepower.

But there was one thing I understood.

A professional treated a firefight like a chess problem. They would

move their pieces on the board to ensure they could finish off the enemy no matter where they fled. Once they had taken their positions, there was no turning things around. We had to do something before that happened.

That meant there was a deadline that meant game over if they reached it.

But an amateur like me had no idea where that was.

300 meters?

200 meters?

100 meters?

Or 0 meters???

Then my entire vision greatly changed.

It felt like having a black shadow arrive from the upper left.

“!?”

At the same time, Ayumi’s outlines blurred. Everyone had to be within 100cm of each other, but we could not see each other even as those two crashed into each other.

But the observers had moved in to attack at point-blank range. This was no accident. Their chess problem was already complete. At this rate, Ayumi and Erika would be defeated sooner or later!

“(Maxwell, I’m going to make a request so search for one of these in the nearby area!)”

“Sure. But what will you use it for?”

“(I don’t have time to explain. Just give me online control and translate my lines into English!)”

I then held the smartphone to my mouth like a bus tour guide’s boxy microphone.

“ ‘The bombs! They’re about to fall from the sky!!’ ”

At the same time, Ayumi was slammed back-first into the ground with a dull sound. That zombie had killed so many Bright Cross combat members in the simulator, but the man did it so easily. Erika was busy protecting the Class Rep, so she couldn’t have helped. If I had been two seconds slower, that large man’s hand-axe-sized combat knife would have slit my little sister’s throat.

But the man stopped moving and looked over.

And just before that silver glint was thrust out toward me, I shouted again.

“ ‘You know we rewrote your maps, don’t you!? Well, now you’re in the lethal range! Too bad!!’ ”

“————”

The man said something. But damn, I couldn’t make out the rapid-fire English. And I hadn’t ordered Maxwell to translate the other person’s voice.

But the look on his face and in his eyes was enough: *You couldn’t possibly break through a military data link. An amateur couldn’t rewrite that.*

Or something along those lines.

But his vehement denial meant he could not entirely cast aside his doubts. That fear was what I needed.

So I used my empty hand to point straight up and said one more thing.

“ ‘Then don’t complain to me when your allies’ bombs hit you.’ ”

Just then, an incredibly thick flash of light and burst of noise wiped out everyone’s senses.

Nothing happened for a while.

Only a strange sense of floating enveloped me.

“Kh…”

That first groan had to be from the Class Rep. Yes, other than me who knew what was coming, she would have taken the least damage.

After all, she was a combat amateur and wouldn’t be able to imagine what kind of damage an aerial bomb would do.

“Wh-what happened, Satori-kun?”

“Feeling a headache and some nausea? If you’re fine, then help me out. I want to tie up all of the observers while they’re collapsed.”

I tossed her a torn power cable I found nearby and I twisted back the combat knife man’s hands and bound them.

“Have you ever heard there’s a way to kill someone by firing a blank?”

“?”

“Press the gun against a bound person’s head and make sure to take your time and show them what you’re doing. Then pull the trigger and the close-range noise and light will make them think

they've been shot and they'll die from shock."

"Th-then that wasn't a bomb…?"

"Sure," said Maxwell. "Las Vegas's resorts hold a fireworks parade every day. There were some program-controlled and electronically-fired fireworks in the rubble, so I took control of them and detonated them under the observers' feet."

"The psychological effect was even greater for professionals who know just how frightening bombs are. That's why ignorant high schoolers like us could recover so much faster."

That said, I hadn't expected it to take out Erika and Ayumi quite so well. They looked cute lying dazed on the ground, but it worried me about the path they had walked in the past.

"Truth, have you finally expanded your repertoire to include the paranormal? Are you going to make something float without touching it next?"

"Your country really does love those glowing swords. Oh, but more importantly. Erika, Ayumi! Just get up already!! It would devastate the reputation of the undead if a trick like that stops your heart!"

The two of them groaned and stirred on the filthy ground like they had a hangover. I was a little afraid to tell them the truth. They would probably get mad at me for not telling them beforehand.

Anyway.

We had safely captured the military observers and we had the large radio they used. That gave us a connection back to their boss in that frightening Area 51. If we got Anastasia's help to contact that boss while pretending to be the observers, we could make a high-level targeted email attack.

“Maxwell, you take care of the connection. Anastasia, how about it? Can you get started?”

“Wait, wait, please wait. I’m restoring the past 50 report files found in the internal memory and going over them with a text disguise program that determines the author’s writing quirks. We need to really sound like them if we want to fool this VIP.”

“Thanks.”

I couldn’t even order a pizza over the phone here, so a long email full of military jargon and codes was out of the question.

“Okay! That should be enough learning. Let’s get started, Truth. Let’s disguise ourselves as an observer report and swipe all the classified data in the heart of Area 51. We might find some alien autopsy footage.”

“I’m not sure what the difference between an Archenemy and an alien is, so can I even laugh at that joke?”

That produced a dramatic reaction of “My, my” and “Fuguu!!” from my beautiful sisters, so they apparently did not want to be in the same category as aliens. Even Anastasia puffed out her cheeks on the other end of the call.

“…You’d better remember you said that, Truth.”

“It’s way too hard to figure out what Archenemies will like or not! But we can do this intercultural exchange later, so let’s get started.”

“Yes. It’s time to show you what a hacker of justice can do.”

Once we went for it, it was almost easy.

How long had they been accumulating and hiding these? The massive number of files stockpiled in Area 51 passed through a foreign server and reached a throwaway free storage account.

“It would take decades to look through all of this properly…” I said.

“That was so easy it was boring,” added Anastasia. “I suppose the preparations really are the best part of a festival.”

The military would probably cry if they heard that. Because in a lot of cases, lives were literally at risk if those secrets got out.

Now, then.

“Maxwell. We don’t have time to look at it all, so search for the necessary terms.”

“Sure.”

“Eh? You can give your program instructions that vague?” asked Anastasia.

Heh. The processor speed wasn’t all that mattered with a computer.

“First, I will search for information on the individual this targeted email attack was sent to. James Willy-Willy. Sex: Male. Age: 52. He is commander of the US Air Force Nevada Airbase and his rank is colonel. I am gathering all documents closely related to him.”

“Also grab the ones on the gels. They might have some other official name, though.”

“54 documents found. Development Codename: Slave X. To summarize, the Archenemy Shoggoths that were discovered in the remains of an Antarctic crater were chemically and surgically altered to create them. To restrain their violence, their thought

bridge was physically severed so they would specialize in simple reactions. They seek only their predatory cycle of leaping toward any motion in the dust of the air, so they are an immortal soldier with no risk of rebellion."

That was not a fun thing to hear.

An Archenemy had been artificially turned into a weapon. It was all for the humans' benefit. It was a lot like altering someone's brain to keep them from thinking.

…After everything that happened, I couldn't exactly become unconditional friends with them, but in a way, the gels were victims too.

"Plus, I have found some information useful to us," said Maxwell.

"What is it?"

"After the gels consume their prey, the victim can be retrieved within 72 hours. It seems it would be possible to save the eaten people. It may look like they are being completely dissolved and absorbed, but the person and the gel can be separated if more than 9.5 Gs of gravitational energy are applied with a centrifuge."

"R-really!?" said Anastasia. "Then it's possible to save everyone! They aren't dead!! That's great, Truth! You really are insanely cool in everything you do!"

"…"

I could not exactly celebrate that.

The Area 51 researchers had gone so far as to rob the Archenemies of their ability to think, so why would they leave a chance of rescue in there?

…To eliminate the guilt for whoever was using them.

This meant they weren't killing anyone, only neutralizing them. Being eaten by the gels was not a guaranteed death because they could just be placed inside a centrifuge. That "excuse" must have made the trigger feel a whole lot lighter. Even if they knew deep in their hearts that their higher ups never intended to order that re-separation.

"Any connection to my stepmom? To Amatsu Yurina?"

"No. There are no related files."

"Then what about a reason or benefit for an Archenemy to attack other Archenemies?"

"It seems there is more than one faction of Archenemies. There seems to be a group that is less than fond of the group setting up their base in Las Vegas, ruling the city with Mephistopheles, and indirectly manipulating the economy to construct a safe zone for themselves."

"But who?" asked Anastasia. "They're Archenemies too, aren't they? We're willing to accept any of our fellow Archenemies."

"Maxwell."

"Sure. The term Absolute Noah appears quite frequently."

…?

That term had also made an appearance in that incident set in an abandoned hospital. Some horrific Calamity was about to hit the earth, so that group was planning to escape to somewhere before it happened. In a way, they were believers in an apocalypse of their own invention. But only a few thousand of the 7 billion on the planet could receive their salvation. The rest could only be saved as

genetic samples kept in cold storage.

“Absolute Noah should not be interested in increasing their status on the earth,” said Maxwell. “Since they have already been chosen as one of the few VIPS with a spot on that ‘ark’, they should already have all the connections they need. And whether it is true or not, they are convinced civilization and society will collapse before long, so I do not see why they feel any reason to build new connections.”

“It felt like they were a mixed group of humans and Archenemies, didn’t it?” I said.

“Sure. There is a good chance that they let the out-of-control Bright Cross continue functioning because they hoped that mixture of fear and negotiation could bring the world’s undead and immortals into line.”

“That must be why they didn’t like the Las Vegas group using up so much of the overall Archenemy resources on things here. It was a way of unifying Archenemy thought. And even if they obeyed, who knows if they would even get a spot on the ark.”

“W-we don’t want their help!” said Anastasia.

I could see why she would be angry.

“But if data on Absolute Noah was hidden on a classified Area 51 server, do they have a connection to the US Air Force?”

“Sure, there are several shell corporations in between, but James Willy-Willy’s computer was used to transfer money to and exchange classified information with Absolute Noah. The user’s iris was used for password authentication. Based on the footage from the web camera used for that, no one was impersonating him or physically threatening him. It was definitely him using his computer of his own free will.”

That meant Area 51 had acted on a request from Absolute Noah when they attacked Las Vegas with the gels and stealth bombers. He was probably told he would lose his ticket and be left behind during the Calamity otherwise.

There was a concept known as civilian control. The actual soldiers were not allowed to use their weapons without permission. So the real suspicion had to be placed on the congress that gave the go sign. They had apparently given up on fighting the Calamity and were desperate to earn a ticket for that ark. Just how far had the corruption spread below the surface?

“What does it say about Absolute Noah? You said there wasn’t anything about my stepmom, but does it give the names of any other members or the source of their funding?”

“Sure. Area 51 was no more than an external group and it does not seem the administration of Absolute Noah itself was directly involved.”

“The world’s most mysterious military base was treated like a pawn?” said Anastasia. “This Absolute Noah group is something else.”

“But there is another document that included the term Absolute Noah.”

“Yeah?”

We were calling it an ark, but we didn’t really know what Absolute Noah was. It could be a giant underground nuclear shelter, a megafloat city on the ocean, or a spaceship meant to leave the planet.

At any rate, Maxwell answered me.

“Sure. There is a pin labeled Absolute Noah 04 at the bottom of the Hoover Dam, that valuable water reservoir for the desert city of Las Vegas.”

[confidential] Report Concerning the Secret Hidden at the Bottom of the Dam [storage A51]

This technically isn’t part of Area 51’s jurisdiction, but I will file a report anyway.

Some people occasionally approach the bottom of the dam out of curiosity, but the secret there is protected by placing labels on the stairs and then ending their social life or physical life depending on how close they got.

But going too far would actually gather attention, so caution is required. Avoid using guns if at all possible and choose natural but certain methods such as rattlesnake venom.

We are working with people who we could stand to have indebted to us.

Weighing the pros and the cons and, if the pros win out, cooperating with whoever it might be is the capitalist way of thinking. As a member of the United States, it is your duty to remain faithful to profit above all else. As the Cold War proved, the world’s #2 justice and below are no more than convenient villains. So our United States must always remain the strongest and #1 justice and money is the power we need to ensure that. Reject that and your justice will be far too fragile. A claim made without being heard is at best a stepping stone for someone else.

But continue working with the CIA on the intelligence front. If feigning obedience is not enough to get what we want, we must use brute force or trickery to steal it. That’s the American way.

Chapter 8

We had one piece of luck.

As the dark night burned, we found an off-road car in the rubble that Maxwell could fully control.

Burned-out cars were everywhere, the roads had collapsed, and buildings had fallen onto them. A normal sedan never could have made it, but an off-road one designed to hop along a sandy and rocky wasteland might manage.

“Fuguu. Does this country really drive around in things like this like they own the place?”

“Look where we are. This is a Solenoid Motors car dealership. This was probably a display model in their showcase. Will this work, Maxwell?”

“Sure. I have successfully slaved all of the vehicle’s privileges and taken full control. Just to be safe, please sweep aside all of the glass shards so you do not step on them.”

“Y’know, I never really thought I’d be riding in a car driven by a talking AI. It’s like a dream come true. It hardly feels real even though I set it up.”

“Next up is a flying time machine. Right, Truth?”

We regrouped with Anastasia in the underground passageway and stuffed ourselves into the passenger space which was surprisingly cramped for such a large vehicle. Maxwell drove us through rubble-strewn Las Vegas.

“Truth, what is that?”

“Some treats the car dealership placed inside for customers. All the chocolate ones melted from the heat, so it’s just the cookie ones left.”

We split those among everyone and munched on them…but what the hell!? It was way sweeter than a sugar-coated rice cracker!!

“Cough, cough! But it says sugarless on the package!”

“H-hey, Satori-kun. Does that mean it’s all done with artificial sweeteners?”

“It would be just right for eating with some black coffee!! It makes you really thirsty…no, it clings to your throat!?”

“Well, it probably is meant to go with coffee.”

My blonde sister seemed oddly nonchalant about it. What triggered my danger instincts was how Ayumi never even tried it despite being such a big eater.

Our destination was the Hoover Dam, the water reservoir outside of Las Vegas.

Absolute Noah 04.

Las Vegas had been destroyed. James Willy-Willy had done his job so perfectly that he had probably earned his ticket for the ark. … Except he would soon discover the leak of data from Area 51, so he might be willing to burn the world to the ground if the alternative was taking responsibility for that. If so, he might be on his way to Absolute Noah 04. And since the number of tickets was limited, he could not bring a bunch of bodyguards with him.

What would we do if we met him?

What *could* we do?

I didn't know anything here, but I couldn't just let him do this. That wealthy man had done as he was told and bared his fangs against 4 million humans and Archenemies just to save his own skin. And if he had been given an ark ticket, he may have had contact with Amatsu Yurina, my stepmom and Archenemy Lilith, in her behind-the-scenes role. He could have stopped her, but that James bastard had succumbed to his desire for the ticket.

…Why was I acting like I was any better?

I knew I was just lashing out. Stopping her was my responsibility too as her family. But because I couldn't do that or anything else, I just couldn't bring myself to forgive James's cowardly pride that had led him to go along with it despite knowing all the details.

I couldn't get over my image of that bastard boarding the ark and laughing as he survived the destruction of the world.

Just then, I saw something moving through the windshield. It was probably coming from a manhole, but an amorphous mass rapidly rose from the ground.

"Warning: gel."

"That's fine. When they grow, they're just faking it by adding to their volume like a princess dress's petticoat. Maxwell, run it over!!"

The engine gave an even more violent roar and the off-road car plowed right into the middle of the gel which had grown to the size of a small hill. With a sticky popping sound, giant but thin petal-like membranes flew through the air and red slime splattered in every direction.

The gels ate organic materials, so they did not actively eat inorganic things like metal or glass. Driving right through the center was fine as long as the windows were tightly closed.

While controlling the off-road car, Maxwell used the wipers to wipe the gel from the windshield.

But…

“Wah!? Somethings coming out of here, Truth!!”

Anastasia shouted frantically from the passenger seat and the invisible barbed wire known as fear wrapped around my heart.

Something was oozing out of the air conditioning vent. It was red, translucent, and slimy…a gel!?

“Yes, yes. Excuse me a moment.”

Erika acted like it was nothing at all. She pulled a barf bag from the back pocket of the driver’s seat, leaned forward from the back seat, and slammed it against the air conditioning vent.

It happened at almost the exact moment that the gel leaped out.

But Erika’s barf bag was faster. The red slime was trapped in the thin plastic bag. Overall, it was about the size of a rabbit. It squirmed around, but she closed the mouth of the bag before it could escape.

…The gels ate organic things and could not eat inorganic things.

But that had still required an incredible amount of skill. If the Class Rep or I tried it, we would’ve had our fingers dissolved and then had our entire body covered.

She really was an Archenemy.

It wasn't just their undeadness. They also had abnormally high physical abilities.

"There."

After opening the window a little and throwing out the struggling barf bag, Erika wiped her hands off with a handkerchief. That Eastern European Queen Vampire did everything in an elegant fashion.

Given this, head-on collisions with the gels seemed like a bad idea. But we would never make it out of Las Vegas if we had to take a detour every time we saw a surviving gel.

"Onii-chan, open the sunroof."

"?"

"The gels respond to air movements, right? Let's throw things at them to confuse them."

The off-road car had supposedly been decorating a car dealership, but the back seat had a cardboard box full of opera glasses. They may have been handed out for free in front of the store during a parade at night.

Maxwell swerved back and forth while Ayumi threw opera glasses everywhere to allow the off-road car out of the burning city.

"There are fewer and fewer buildings…"

"Sure. We have reached the outskirts of the city. We are about to reach the open desert."

A tanker truck had rolled on its side near the exit. It looked unnatural in how out of place it looked.

“Maxwell. Did you record the license number of that tanker truck?”

“Sure. Do you think it was used to carry the gels in from the airbase?”

“I don’t know, but it’s worth remembering.”

We still didn’t know how the gels entered Las Vegas or the actual timetable for that. Especially when it came to the initial breakout. But the desert city had few entrances, so if the gels took out a few highways and airports, it could easily be cut off from the outside world.

…When I thought about it, I realized it was a lot like Kukyou City.

We drove along an isolated desert road with the roaring fires of the city behind us. The Hoover Dam existed at the west end of a giant national park in a lake that measured more than 200km long. It was an artificial lake created by the dam, but it rivaled Lake Biwa in size. This country’s scale really was insane.

“Maxwell, can you prove a connection between the gels and the military using just the data taken from Area 51?”

“That would be difficult. Copying and faking digital data is a simple task and the official credibility of data stolen in a cyber-attack is low. On top of that, people will be skeptical of data coming from Area 51 which has already produced several silly legends.”

“That’s another reason to want a witness. No matter how rotten they are, an elite is an elite. That gives all the more weight to their words. We just have to get James himself to say it.”

Pursuing this could eventually lead the tremors back to my own family. I could be bringing down the stepmother I ate dinner with.

Was I really prepared for that?

Was I maybe only pretending I understood what that meant so I wouldn't have to think about it?

I asked myself that over and over again.

But I just couldn't pretend not to see this. If the truth of the Las Vegas disaster wasn't made public, innocent Archenemies around the world would be seen as dangerous and hunted down like a witch hunt. Absolute Noah believed the world was going to be destroyed soon anyway, so it was a matter of sooner or later for them. But those of us who wanted to keep living in this world couldn't look at it the same way.

"User. We will soon arrive at the Hoover Dam on the west end of Grand Canyon National Park. Are you sure about this?"

"…I am. Erika, Ayumi. I'm sorry."

"Fuguu. You have nothing to apologize for, Onii-chan."

"That's right. …Sometimes you have to stop someone *because* they're family."

The words caught in my throat.

No matter what they said, I was pretty sure I would be carrying around this decision for the rest of my life.

"Truth, sorry about interrupting you now, but be careful. These Absolute Noah people were bossing Area 51 around. They may have used those ark tickets as bait to borrow forces from the army and marines as well."

"Yeah. Hoover Dam might be their fortress."

The facility held the extreme bombshell known as Absolute Noah 04 at the bottom of the water reservoir. It might have its own

guards that did not need to be borrowed from elsewhere. If Archenemy Lilith was one of their leaders, then they could also be using an Archenemy force instead of just a human one.

I couldn't help but feel all the more nervous.

My throat was dry and sweat coated my skin. My lungs and heart were working overtime.

And yet.

Nevertheless.

"…?"

We traveled 20-30km east of Las Vegas.

We stopped the off-road car a bit away from the dam and had the Class Rep and Anastasia wait in the car.

And as soon as we stepped outside, something seemed horribly wrong.

No.

"Why does everything feel so relaxed…?"

It hadn't been like this when we clashed with the observers in that city of rubble and fire. There had been something there that seemed to solidify the air and clog up our throats. But that wasn't here. It was no more than a tourist destination. Or had they blended in to the point that an amateur like me couldn't detect them?

"What does this mean?"

"Fuguu. I don't understand…"

Erika and Ayumi seemed to have the same opinion. That meant it probably wasn't just me being dense.

Regardless, we slowly approached the dark dam.

I had imagined having a sniper suddenly shoot me in the head or a mine buried in the sand blowing me to pieces, but there was none of that. The place was so deserted I started to suspect we had the wrong location.

"This is odd." Erika held her fingers to her slender chin. "A large dam like this should have guards patrolling at night to prevent suicides. They wouldn't leave it to drones or security cameras because they might need to physically convince someone to stop. But I don't see a single flashlight beam."

"Fuguu. And isn't the Hoover Dam a hydroelectric power station more than five times larger than Kurobe? Then there should be workers here 24/7. It wouldn't empty out at night."

…Something was up.

I focused my mind. The oddity wasn't the presence of some noticeable change. It was the absence of them.

It was a solid mass of stone. An arch-shaped concrete cliff. We found a giant dam that looked perfect for bungee jumping.

And we were on top of the dam. We crossed that arch structure that reminded me of the Great Wall of China, but we still saw no sign of any guards.

As far as I could see, water was pouring from the curved wall like it was supposed to, so it all looked properly maintained.

"We can see across the entire reservoir lake from here."

“The secret is at the bottom, Erika. I don’t know what access route they use, but assuming they don’t use a submarine to dive down to the bottom of the artificial lake, there should be a direct tunnel or something.”

In that case, the concrete box at the bottom of the dam seemed most suspicious. That was the turbine room for the hydroelectric power plant.

After crossing the dam’s arch, we saw a four-wheel truck parked directly on the rocks that clearly were not part of an employee parking lot or something.

There was no sign of people here, but it apparently wasn’t completely abandoned.

“Maxwell, photograph and look up that license plate.”

“Sure. The number is registered to a military vehicle. It belongs to the Nevada airbase. It is a bulletproof bodyguard vehicle. A normal soldier is unlikely to use one.”

“So it’s for a military VIP. Then is it James Willy-Willy?”

“User. I have picked up on some wireless signals nearby. Given the situation, they likely belong to Absolute Noah inside the Hoover Dam or to James Willy-Willy.”

“Or the two of them are communicating. Maxwell, can you intercept it?”

“I understand your request, but it uses an unknown encryption method. We must start by working out the random number table or secret key.”

“Hand it over here, Truth. That’s my specialty. I might even have the right key on my ‘key ring’.”

It was great having a (self-styled) hacker of justice (as hilarious as that sounded) who hacked into everything from kitchen IoT appliances to missile silos, infected them with a harmless virus, and send them helpful warnings. She had far more experience, so she would have stolen a lot more “keys” along the way.

“That’s a satellite phone. I can’t believe this. Did that clueless old man really think no one could intercept it if he didn’t use any surface cell towers or fiber optic cables? There’s no way he’d go unnoticed sending out such a powerful signal in the middle of the desert.”

“So can you decrypt it or not?”

“It’s the Osmium Satellite Network. That’s the very first system I left my ‘calling card’ at. I’ve been using that harmless virus to warn them for two years now, but they haven’t fixed a single one of their vulnerabilities. See?”

She acted as casually as someone handing over a manga magazine they were done with.

A clear English conversation immediately came from my smartphone.

“Maxwell, translate it for me. And give it in text so I can read back over it to confirm things.”

“Sure.”

With that one word, the seemingly meaningless radio noise of that foreign language suddenly gained depth. Meaning rose to the surface like I was feeling across the slight bumps and dips with my fingertips.

“I left the base without any bodyguards despite the risk. You need

to take me inside immediately. I did what I was asked, so it is only natural that I demand the repayment laid out in our agreement."

That made it sound like the person who had carried out the attack on Las Vegas. So was it James?

"Maxwell."

"Sure. I am already recording the original voice."

We still got this information using an illegal secret key, so it might be rejected as legal evidence.

That was why I wanted direct access to the bastard.

I exchanged a glance and a nod with my sisters. This would not be easy, but we had to do it.

"Maxwell, continue recording and analyzing. Also, determine the origin point of the signal. I want to capture James before he boards Absolute Noah 04."

"Sure."

I didn't know what exactly Absolute Noah 04 was, but it was designed to survive the destruction of the human race. It had to have some kind of thick metal door, so this would be a lot more trouble if that was locked.

"I have determined the origin point based on the direction and intensity. It seems to be near the very bottom layer within the dam's arch."

That was right at the bottom of the cliff.

I snapped my fingers to gather my sisters' attention and then we started toward the entrance at the top of the dam's arch.

I had never been in a dam before, so I had no idea if this was normal or not.

We found a small boxy room full of thick pipes. It was lined with tanks of some sort. Was that water, air, or oil inside? I wasn't sure. I couldn't tell what purpose any individual component hand, so it felt like I was searching through a crash-landed alien spaceship.

"Fuguu. What do we do, Onii-chan?"

"For now, we take the stairs down. Let's get to the origin point of that signal."

The security really was lax. We didn't run across anyone along the way. Or was the place guarded by a single powerful Archenemy who didn't need any other help?

The text translation of the voices continued on my smartphone.

"Ohh, you're the one from the IMF. Thanks for your help at that golf organization…"

"And thank you for all your hard work. I know this was sudden, but it was worth taking a helicopter here, wasn't it?"

"Ho ho. I caught on right away. But I did not like first learning of this secondhand via social media. I wish you had told me in advance."

Instead of a conversation, it sounded more like picking up the phone conversations of multiple people in the same place. The wealthy people who had gotten tickets to Absolute Noah 04 were apparently gathered together on their way somewhere.

"That isn't good. It sounds like they're going to start boarding soon. Where's the next stairway?"

There was no stairway or elevator in the dam that led directly from

the top to the bottom. The paths down were short and we would have to search through a complex array of pathways to find the next stairway. Was that meant as an anti-terror mechanism?

“Satori-kun. This is the next stairway. We should be at the bottom level soon.”

“Kh. Let’s run the rest of the way.”

We were approaching the center of the mystery. We were closing in on the villain. So why did everything feel so mismatched? It felt wrong, like buttoning your shirt up in the wrong holes. I didn’t want to run across an assassin, but it felt abnormal for things to go so smoothly.

And then we reached the bottom level of the dam.

We had arrived without a single injury.

“James Willy-Willy!!”

I shouted out without thinking because what looked like a bank vault’s round door was just about to close. Large panels of thick, heavy-looking metal covered the wall. If that door closed, we would probably be out of options. And the one who turned back when I called that name was probably the real one. As the large door slowly closed, an elderly man looked back through the crescent moon of a crack.

My smartphone translated for me:

“Ohh, if it isn’t Madam Yurina’s children! But weren’t you scheduled to board Absolute Noah 00?”

That was not at all the reaction I had expected.

I had expected insults or mockery, but he actually seemed

welcoming!?

Erika hatefully opened her mouth.

“The Class Rep and Anastasia aren’t with us. If members of the Amatsu family show up at an Absolute Noah facility, they’re probably going to assume it’s a surprise inspection or something. We do apparently have tickets, after all.”

Was that why no assassins attacked? Had they long since noticed us and could have killed us at any time, but they let us through as VIPs!?

I felt like I had unwittingly participated in some kind of crime. A bitter flavor filled my mouth.

“ ‘Go to hell, you villain! I’m gonna get you to admit to every last thing you did at Las Vegas!!’ ”

“Ohh, ohh. If that’s what you want, feel free. So you want to know what someone like me did to earn my ticket to Absolute Noah 04? Why, you could call that my life’s greatest accomplishment. I will give you a full report over some victory drinks once we overcome the Calamity.”

“…!!”

This was not good.

I wasn’t getting through to him at all. He got the surface meaning of the words, but the emotions and feelings contained in them weren’t reaching him in the slightest!!

“That’s how it works with madmen, Onii-chan. He sacrificed 4 million lives for that ticket. And I don’t see a wife or kids with him. He just cares about saving himself. Everyone else is disposable. That’s the kind of insane cult this is.”

“Kids?” he said. “You can always make more of those.”

That left me at a complete loss for words.

And since he responded to Ayumi, he must not have needed the translation.

“Which reminds me. The population will greatly decrease after the Calamity, so I might just have to help repopulate with you two young ladies there. Let’s all look forward to that.”

“!! Fuck off, you dirty old man!!”

“Hah hah. It would seem Madam Yurina’s daughters would prefer not to mix human and Archenemy blood. Then I will make my selection from the other options.”

The way he made it sound like choosing curtains for his room truly did fill me with terror.

…It hadn’t started with the Calamity or the ark tickets. They hadn’t been broken after they succumbed to fear. No, it was because they had a screw loose in the first place that they leaped at the chance for a ticket even if it meant abandoning their families and friends.

Meanwhile, the large round door slowly closed. The gap was filled in.

“Now then, everyone, send my regards to Madam Yurina. And let us meet again in the new world after the Calamity has been overcome.”

“!!”

“You can’t, Satori-kun! You’ll just get your arm or leg taken off by the closing door!! The movable parts alone have to weigh more than 5 tons!!”

I started to run forward, but my vampire older sister rushed after me. She looked slender, but I was powerless in the Archenemy's grasp.

The door fully closed in front of us. With the sound of air escaping, more than ten thick metal rods located along the door's perimeter produced creaking sound and locked it in place.

The door was now a part of the thick metal panels making up the wall.

"Dammit! Maxwell, Anastasia!!"

"Calm down. Start by sending me the format of the door, Truth!"

"No. There is no connection port and it is not responding to EM or IR signals. It is a fully independent system."

"Is there anything you can pry open on the surface of the door to mess with the wiring!?"

"No. It is cleanly constructed with no visible seams. The unique metallic sheen suggests it is made from ultra-pressure-resistant tungsten steel. I see no components that can be dismantled using handheld tools."

"Then how does anyone get the door open!?" I protested. "There's no dial, keypad, or finger scanner!!"

"There is likely a control panel on the inside," said Maxwell. "They simply need an administrator on the inside at all times. Then there is no need for an interface on the outside. Although I cannot say if they have some means of communicating with those outside or if they simply open and close the door on a set timetable."

"Kh."

Then we were out of options. We had no way in and our skills were no help.

“Erika, Ayumi! Can’t you force open a hole!?”

“That’s a little much to ask…”

“Twenty times the strength of a human might sound like a lot, but that means we can’t do something that twenty humans working together can’t do.”

Damn, is this a complete dead end!?

We couldn’t use illegally stolen digital data as official evidence. Without placing James Willy-Willy directly on the witness stand, the truth of the gels and the bombing would never be revealed and the world’s Archenemies would be treated like villains!!

I punched the thick metal door out of frustration.

And something odd happened.

At first, it seemed like some small sounds. I thought they were some kind of gears or something fitting together within the thick door.

But they weren’t.

“…?”

They were…voices? I never did well on my English tests, but I could kind of tell that these were human voices.

But how?

This should have been impossible.

“Satori…-kun?”

“Shh.”

Erika voiced her confusion when I suddenly pressed my ear against the door. But I remained focused and spoke to my smartphone.

“Maxwell, have you noticed this?”

“Sure. Compared to the voice samples taken in the previous conversation, one of the many physical voices is an 89.8% match with James Willy-Willy. It seems to be coming from further left than the door itself.”

I made my way to the wall itself. Giant panels made of what seemed to be stainless steel or tungsten steel were lined up at even intervals. And there were of course no obvious screws or bolts. Each panel was taller than I was.

If they were as thick as that round door, they would be at least more than a meter thick. At that thickness, they wouldn’t even need soundproofing material to prevent voices from passing through.

And yet.

That should have been the case, but…

“——————”

“——————”

…I could hear them. I could hear voices from the other side. Did they have speakers embedded in the wall to confuse us? But I couldn’t think of any reason for laying this trap.

“You may be looking at this wrong,” said Maxwell.

“…What do you mean?”

“Sure. There is a trick here and it was meant to fool someone. But we may not have been the targets. If there is no logical reason to set a trap for us, then it may have been directed elsewhere.”

I had to change how I looked at this.

It was a trick meant for someone else.

Why could I hear voices through the wall?

“…Don’t tell me,” I muttered.

And then I pressed my palm against the center of the one of the panels lining the heavy-looking metal wall.

“But it couldn’t be!”

I slowly pressed my body weight against it.

And then…

Creak…

“…!!!???”

It was such a shock that I jerked my hand back. It was like I had carelessly touched a hot teakettle. The sensation remaining in my palm was a completely normal one. I probably felt it on a daily basis. But why here? It was so out of place that it felt horrifically ominous.

I felt unsteady on my feet and placed my hand on the next panel over. This time, I knew what I was likely to feel.

I placed my palm against it and slowly pressed my body weight on

it.

It was the same feeling as before.

In other words…

"…A door?" I spoke without thinking when I looked through that space that opened far too easily. "Are all of the wall's metal panels just thin doors!?"

I couldn't believe it. They were only as thick as the glass doors you pushed to open at convenience stores or school entranceways. What had happened to the thickness of the wall? No, it was only the round door that was thick. The rest was flimsily thin.

But what did that mean?

I didn't know what the mysterious Calamity was. Was it some kind of phenomenon? But this was supposed to be their way of protecting themselves from that great danger. And this wouldn't protect them at all!

"…"

"…"

The villains stood on the other side of the thin door. Including that old man named James Willy-Willy. But even though we were close enough to reach out and grab each other, we had all frozen in place. We could not even produce a single trembling voice.

They were as confused as I was. Despite being VIPs who had acted like they could answer any of the world's mysteries.

How long did that last?

A minute? An hour?

Finally, I heard some footsteps that clearly did not belong to any of us. They came from behind and thus from the dam, but it did not sound like Erika or Ayumi's shoes. I was frozen in place with the door standing open, but I managed to slowly turn around just in time to see a small girl in a baggy work jumpsuit step out from the complex passageways of the dam. She had white skin and semi-long black hair. But she did not appear to be Asian. Her facial features were more like Erika's or Anastasia's than the Class Rep's or Ayumi's.

She was probably one of the original owners of the Hoover Dam. In other words, one of those who had built Absolute Noah 04.

She worked for my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina.

That made her an enemy Archenemy.

"Oh? So you noticed the trick, did you? Then I'll have to go with Plan B."

"Wh-what? What are you…what?"

"And worry not, everyone. I have no intention of taking Absolute Noah 04 from you. This ark already belongs to you."

"What does this mean!? Isn't Absolute Noah 04 supposed to be a solid barrier that can withstand whatever the Calamity is supposed to be!? So why is it less secure than a bathroom stall!? It's just a bunch of thin doors that don't even lock! Anyone could get in from any direction!"

Thin walls would be one thing, but thin doors made no sense at all. I mean, doors are made to pass through. Just imagine your own house was built like this. Why did they take it this far? Unless you were some kind of exhibitionist, you'd just find it creepy to be surrounded by lockless doors to the outside at all times. You

wouldn't even be able to take a nap. What mindset would lead you to design something like this?

I had no reason whatsoever to support them, but for some reason, I found myself criticizing the unfair treatment of James Willy-Willy and the other VIPs. My instincts were telling me who was better between those shady VIPs and this girl in a baggy work jumpsuit.

"Yes, that is the point."

This girl's darkness was probably much deeper.

She contained something beyond mere death.

"We invited these unsightly guests who we knew would throw everyone else under the bus in their rush to this house of straw. And once they found peace of mind here, the Calamity would finish them all off. We had simply built a system to give them their just deserts."

I had no idea what she meant.

…So…so what was this?

The Nevada airbase and the rest of these VIPs had dirtied their hands to win the favor of my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina. But the secret at the bottom of the Hoover Dam wasn't meant to protect them? It was no more than a house of straw meant to give them peace of mind before pushing them down the steep slope to a fear of death!?

"You saw what happened in Las Vegas, didn't you?" The girl in the baggy work jumpsuit spoke calmly to me. "The ark is a limited resource. Since it is not possible to save everyone, we must select our people carefully. But sadly, if we use a computer to select them based on the official records such as academic history, income,

social status, achievements, and so on, you end up with this. We are not interested in the people with the highest ranks. We only want to rescue the normal sort of good person who will instinctually reach out their hand when they see someone in need and naturally help each other out when the need arises."

Noah's Ark was a story about god wiping the entire world clean because immorality had spread throughout the world after fallen angels and humans intermingled.

At god's command, Noah gathered two of every animal on a single boat.

In other words, he selected them.

If those deemed unqualified had spotted and approached the giant boat at that stage, what would have happened? Or what if someone had greedily tried to steal the boat?

"I can't believe this…"

It was true.

James Willy-Willy deserved criticism for what he had done. He was responsible for those gels and that bombing. Just picturing Las Vegas filled with red and black made me want to tear him limb from limb.

But could my stepmom's group be the ones to criticize him?

I mean, this was practically on the same level as Kaguya-hime's impossible tasks! They had invited these people, but because the machine-run selection result was not what they wanted, they had given these people more and more ridiculous demands just waiting for them to fail. And those who kept at it were given a false goal line where they would finally find relief just in time to be blown

away by the mysterious Calamity. What the hell was that!?

Could I really let that happen?

In fact, the VIPs could hear all this because the girl seemed to find it natural to just view them with scorn, so would they just stand there and let it happen? James Willy-Willy was hardly a good person, but if he had a high level of international education, he could easily be bilingual. And even I could tell this was not a group you wanted to anger.

“Ha…ha ha.”

I heard dry laughter.

It was James Willy-Willy. That old man who had lived a long life of success had likely never laughed like this before.

“Ha ha ha. Hwah ha ha ha. Heh, heh hah.”

“…”

“Don’t you make a damn fool of meeeeee!!”

He suddenly shouted in anger. Since I was only seeing an emotionless translation from Maxwell, it felt oddly empty. But it was actually surprising that it took him this long to explode. These people had seen the malice of humanity from behind the scenes, but even their minds had gone blank.

James Willy-Willy reached into his expensive-looking suit and pulled out a bottle small enough to fit in his palm. It contained a translucent red liquid. What was that? A drink? No, perfume??? After trying to find a normal sort of answer, I realized I was being an idiot.

What had I seen at Las Vegas?

They were a red liquid.

And they could not eat anything inorganic.

What had been created based on the Archenemy Shoggoths at Area 51?

“A gel!? You brought one here!?”

I immediately jumped back…no, I wish I could say I did something cool like that. Instead, my legs practically gave out below me. I forced shut the camouflaged door as if slamming my back against it. They only ate organic things, so it wouldn’t be able to eat that thin door. It wouldn’t be able to attack Erika or Ayumi. Meanwhile, that elderly VIP continued moving with the bottle in hand. James Willy-Willy twisted and removed the bottle’s metal cap.

His words were translated on my smartphone’s screen.

“Don’t you underestimate me… I will decide my own fate. Not even you lot get to decide what happens to me!!”

He raised the small bottle.

The only opened door had been shut, so I was the only outsider here. That meant I was being targeted. This would be really bad if he threw it at me. That was far more of a threat than a Molotov cocktail. I knew that, but my legs were too weak to move. But then a question came to mind.

…If he’s planning throw and break the bottle, why did he bother removing the cap?

Goose bumps rose across my body. That was only a small question, but it caused all of my assumptions to crumble and fall into the abyss.

And James Willy-Willy tilted back the raised bottle.

He dumped it over his own head.

Just like the victory celebration after a sports match.

“Uuh…”

It was awful.

The many sticky sounds were truly horrific.

This gel was much smaller than James’s body, so the red slime entered his skull like it was a rotting apple. From there, it was like watching an inflated doll deflate. I had never known how wildly someone would thrash about when being eaten from the inside.

“Urp!?”

I was glad I had shut the thin door with my back. I didn’t want to let even Erika or Ayumi see this. The ominous sensation in my chest was different from simply seeing someone attacked and killed. I suddenly remembered my smartphone was connected to Anastasia, so I quickly used my finger to cover the small lens on the back.

“User.”

“Temporarily cut off the footage to Anastasia! Just give her the sound!”

“Understood, so please uncover the lens.”

Someone was dissolving before my eyes. James Willy-Willy had seemed like such a great evil, but he vanished without leaving a trace. It was such a brutal fate, but he did not even scream. His luxury suit and everything below it may have been silk because not

even his clothing remained. Only the gel wriggled on the floor, released from its bottle.

…What was going on?

He had sounded so courageous, but then he committed suicide? No, was this what he had meant by saying he would decide his own fate and that he would not let anyone else decide what happened to him? If he was going to be killed for the convenience of others, he would prefer to die at his own hand? Was that the cruel decision he had made?

“Now, then.”

I heard a calm voice.

The girl in a baggy work jumpsuit reappeared while sounding so casual she might as well have been opening the door to a school bathroom stall or shower booth. I wasn’t sure when she had gotten it, but she was dragging something while her semi-long hair swayed. What was it? A flamethrower or something like that? There was a large metal nozzle with a flame at the end, a hose, and a cylindrical tank that was dragged around on wheels like a vacuum cleaner. It was true the gels seemed to not like fire and heat, but…

“I will clean this up. But are you sure none of you have any regrets? Especially you remaining VIPs.”

“…?”

What was she talking about now? The small gel that James Willy-Willy had used to kill himself was right there next to those villains. It could attack one of them at any time. If someone could dispose of it now, what could be better?

“Do I need to spell it out?”

The work jumpsuit girl grinned.

And she said it.

“You have been abandoned by the true Absolute Noah and that means you have no way of escaping the Calamity. This is your final chance. If you do not choose a gentle and safe death here, you will only experience the slow suffering of an inescapable extinction.”

There was malice there.

I wasn’t sure even that blue bunny girl could have smiled like that.

And the results were swift.

The VIPs were not being threatened with a gun to their heads. They had not been tied up and their precious families were not being used as shields.

And yet.

“M-me too…”

“Wait, I’m going first!”

“No fair! You always push your way to the front like that…!!”

Are you…kidding!?

I did not know enough English for daily life. I was reliant on Maxwell for translations. So I initially thought the text on the screen was some kind of bug or error.

But when I looked up, the madness continued.

Why were they gathering around it? I could understand if they were trying to escape but getting eaten anyway, but they were

rushing toward it! Like they were fighting over Fukubukuro at a department store on New Year's!

There was no salvation here.

Those wealthy men and women rushed to be the first to grab that small gel and then were dissolved. They were not swallowed; they were eaten from within like a rotting tree trunk infested with caterpillars. I could make no sense of what I was watching. They were like babies who yet to develop a fear of fire.

"Because."

I couldn't speak English, but she must have seen the confusion in my eyes. Someone who appeared to be a former stage actress whispered to me while half dissolved.

I wanted to believe the translation was wrong.

"There are only two options here."

"…"

"This isn't like a knife or a gun. This is the last flight out if we are to comfortably escape without feeling that fear."

"……
……"

…What was the Calamity?

Was it really such a great tragedy that being dissolved alive seemed like your last hope? These people had to have all sorts of assets and connections to cause such a major incident, but was the Calamity really enough for them to immediately choose euthanasia over resistance? What did they see approaching and what did they seek salvation from?

There was no one to ask.

Not one of them was left!!

“That completes the cleanup of 04 using Plan B. Madam Yurina’s son, I will end this, so please stand back.”

“Wah!?”

The baggy work jumpsuit girl aimed the flamethrower’s thick metal nozzle forward and unleashed a straight line of fire with a calm expression. It wasn’t normal to wield something like that without a mask or fire-resistant clothing and just standing next to her was enough to feel the tingling pain of standing in front of the stove!

The palm-sized gel that had devoured the VIPs twisted around and fled from the pursuing flame, but that did not work well.

Just like the row of doors, the floor and inner walls were also shoddily made. I couldn’t tell you if they were urethane, plastic, or styrofoam, but they quickly melted like chocolate or some other candy placed on a car’s hood in midsummer. They mixed with the gel and then fell to the floor below.

“Based on the reports, the Shoggoth variant developed in Area 51 is unable to eat inorganic materials…” The unknown Archenemy whispered in a singsong voice. “So if it is mixed with a liquefied inorganic material and allowed to rapidly cool and harden, it will be unable to dissolve the foreign material and escape. Thus permanently solidifying it. Just as theorized.”

I couldn’t speak a word.

She was ahead of us on everything. I had no idea how far down the remains had fallen, but I doubted we could recover it before she could. She knew the internal structure while we did not and she

was more skilled. In fact, it was a bit of a mystery why we hadn't been captured and tied up when we were in the middle of the enemy fortress.

I had been unable to save James Willy-Willy or the other VIPs.

And further possibilities would gradually be lost over the next 72 hours.

"You said…04, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What about the other numbers?"

"Not counting 00, numbers 01 through 14 hidden across the world are all purification filters. Will they remain oblivious until the Calamity catches them unawares, or will they meet some other fate within? Either way, their fate is sealed from the moment they step inside. They are all unsightly, but if they were not so dependent on such things, they never would have persistently tracked down the various Absolute Noahs."

No, just telling them the truth would not save them. As I had seen here, they could not bear the shock of having their life's goal stolen before their eyes. That was like saying we were showing them the truth of the world and then swiping their space suit's helmet out in open space.

Was it all being controlled by my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina? Even the understanding and control of people's desires and sending them into despair by taking that away from them? Humans were no match for a demon when it came to controlling negative emotions.

"There is no need to feel worried. The problem has been smoothly resolved. So please rest easy and wait in Kukyou City, Master

Satori. You have already been chosen. Truly chosen.”

“What do you mean smoothly? Without James Willy-Willy’s testimony, we can’t reveal the truth of the gels and the bombing. All the harmless Archenemies around the world are going to be oppressed like they’re man-eaters!”

“That will in fact lead you to give up on earth’s human race and decide to board Absolute Noah. Or so Madam Yurina believes.”

“Kh.”

Really!?

She did all this just for that!?

“But Madam Yurina also said she would respect your free will in deciding whether or not to board. That is why she is working to resolve this problem on her own.”

“How!? James is dead!”

“The bombing of Las Vegas was far too largescale a plan for James Willy-Willy to put together on his own. Another team has already secured a different witness who had infiltrated Congress.”

Was that the person who gave the go sign from their position of civilian control!? That would indeed provide an even better testimony than James.

“So my stepmom was controlling it all. Every last bit of it…”

“Yes.”

She spoke just one word.

The ones who had actually carried out the attack were in Area 51.

And those in Congress who had given the go sign were also guilty. But who had given a glimpse of nonexistent salvation and made the request? Would she be the one to punish them? She had made the request, but now she was abandoning the people working so hard to give her what she wanted and yet she had the nerve to act like *she* was the hero!? Mom! Even if you're a demon lord, that's taking it too far. Or are you going to say this was a standard job for a demon that takes the souls of the rogues who actively seek out a demon to make a contract with!?

"We cannot allow the wicked to enter the ark. That is rule #1. You could say that Madam Yurina has made a truly logical decision."

I wobbled on my feet and nearly collapsed, but for some reason, the baggy work jumpsuit girl gently supported me.

The two of us left the pointlessly melted Absolute Noah 04 and reentered the dam.

"But there is one point on which you may be able to outdo Madam Yurina."

"?"

"Her plan showed no interest in the Las Vegas side that provided no benefit for the Absolute Noah side. She likely has no intent to pay the unnecessary costs needed to drag the victims out of the gels. But 72 hours have yet to pass since the incident began. If you use a powerful-enough centrifuge on the gels that drove Las Vegas to destruction, you could create a result that Madam Yurina truly did not expect."

"That's not possible…" Ayumi shook her head. "Didn't you see what happened, Onii-chan? Who knows how many gels there are. It's just too much. How are we supposed to gather up every gel in Las Vegas and use a centrifuge on them? Where do we get such a large

device!? And more than 9.5 Gs is the same level as the limits of a fighter jet!! No normal machinery can provide that much centrifugal force!!”

“…”

No.

What if…?

Didn’t I have Maxwell, a disaster environment simulator, at my disposal?

“Category 5?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you tell me this?”

“I am a scout for the Absolute Noah side. I have no authority to raise an objection to an order made by Madam Yurina.” The baggy work jumpsuit girl winked. “But my own thoughts are more in line with yours. Honestly, if I had been introduced to you a little sooner, I wouldn’t have hesitated to join you. It really is a shame.”

“You can’t do that now?”

“No, I can’t.”

…*Damn.*

I scratched my head and then turned away from the girl who could not join me.

“Erika, Ayumi. There’s still one more step. It isn’t over yet. Let’s take this outside of mom’s predictions in at least one way.”

“That’s fine with me. But…”

“Fuguu. How are you going to rescue everyone scattered across that desert city?”

That was obvious.

And I already knew where to find the necessary materials.

“By using an even bigger weapon, of course.”

[confidential] Weather Conditions [storage A51]

Our airbase of course uses many aircraft. Even if they are on a different level from civilian passenger planes, there are still certain environments and meteorological conditions best suited for flight.

We fear nothing more than being unable to take off or land in an emergency.

In Nevada, there are spontaneous downbursts and even sandstorms when a few conditions line up just right.

We can imagine a scenario in which an enemy force has already infiltrated the country and intentionally produces weather conditions preventing takeoff to coincide with the attack of an aerial force.

Simulators are used for more than just predicting future results. They are also used to turn back the hands of the clock and check over the exact conditions that caused a certain phenomenon to occur.

It could be war, natural disasters, or Archenemies. An extremely powerful simulator can quantify the conditions necessary for them to occur, and that means those things can be made to occur in the real world. We must never forget that fact.

Chapter 9

Part 1

Perhaps because it could not store up the heat, the desert was cold at night. Enough so that our breaths were white.

And that was not what we needed.

We had to spend the night in the car and get to work once the morning sun rose.

“Can you really save everyone in Vegas, Truth!?”

“Yeah! We need to thank the Hoover Dam, Anastasia. From now on, start drinking tap water instead of that fancy bottled mineral water!!”

“You’re kidding, right? That stuff is worse than chugging milk. It would make me sick on a daily basis. Do you have something against me?”

I tilted my head and wondered if Japan’s water was just really high quality compared to the rest of the world.

“In this sun, it should be hot enough by 10 AM. Maxwell, have you finished the mapping array?”

“Sure. There is no problem there.”

Las Vegas was visible in the distance and black smoke continued to

rise from the rubble it had become. The fires had started with chemical incendiary bombs that could not be put out with mere water and the fire department had been wiped out with everything else, so that was to be expected. But there was no sign of the stealth bomber formation that had been flying so calmly through the sky. They must have been unable to continue their mission now that they had lost the support of the military and Congress. The actual soldiers had no reason to continue.

Erika was weak to sunlight, so she looked nervous inside the car controlled by Maxwell.

“If the bombing has ended, that means the gels are free to move around again. Satori-kun, are you sure this is safe?”

“The gels avoid high temperatures, so I doubt they’ll leave the city during the day. And the desert sand has to be hotter than a car’s hood in midsummer.”

“The bombing continued until dawn and there is still some smoke rising,” said Maxwell. “It is unlikely any of them escaped into the cold desert during the night.”

Our job was only possible with the self-driving off-road car Maxwell was controlling. Without that, we could not have moved 100km this way and 50km that way as if drawing out lines on the desert map.

We left the Class Rep and Ayumi at two of the self-serve gas stations that dotted the desert.

My vampire older sister couldn’t leave the car in the scorching desert. Anastasia and I took up our position in the middle of the desert along the shortest route between the Hoover Dam and Las Vegas.

We needed at least three locations.

Even if we could trigger them individually, it would all be meaningless if they did not fuse together properly.

I had borrowed an amplification antenna from the Hoover Dam and placed it on the roof of the off-road car and I spoke into the smartphone being charged via the cigarette lighter.

“Ayumi, Class Rep. Sorry about the wait. Get started on my signal.”

“Fuguu. Fine, since you bought me a cream roll and orange juice at the vending machine.”

“A-are you sure this will work?”

“Have you forgotten who we have on our side, Class Rep? Maxwell, a simulator that specializes in disaster environments.”

Anastasia waved her hand from outside the car.

I wiped the sweat from Erika’s brow as she limply reclined back in the seat. Then I pulled the smartphone from the cigarette lighter charger cable and stepped out onto that frying pan of land.

“Looks like this is it, Truth. There’s a square cover in the sand. And it looks pretty dangerous, so should we really be messing with it?”

The answer was obviously no, but no one was left in Las Vegas to use the tap water. This wouldn’t cause anyone any trouble.

“Maxwell. Perform the final check.”

“Sure. This is the maintenance valve for the underground water pipe that supplies the Hoover Dam’s water to Las Vegas. In case of a contaminant or clogs in the pipe, it is divided into sections with watertight doors that can be closed between them. If you then

open the valve on the surface, the massive water pressure will push out the contaminant or clog."

"Anything we need to worry about?"

"When opening the valve, make sure no one is near the water release opening. This equipment carries 15 tons of water per second directly from the dam, so a direct hit would launch you more than 25 meters into the air. And it is unlikely your skeleton would survive intact."

"…Ugh. That gimmick sounds like it could smash up a murder machine in sunglasses from the future, Truth."

"Class Rep, Ayumi."

"No problems here, on the technical front anyway," said the Class Rep. "The firefighting pump is ready. …But are you sure about this?"

"This self-service station is unmanned, so there's no one to get after me," said Ayumi. "I'm ready to go and the underground firefighting tank is full."

Good.

The Hoover Dam had a seemingly endless supply of water, but we had no way of transporting several tons of it at once. And in this red-hot griddle of a desert, that water would start boiling in no time.

Given what we needed to do, ice cold water was best. The temperature difference was what mattered. And that was why the term "underground" mattered so much.

…We wanted a colossal centrifuge that would spin the gels spread out across Las Vegas. But modifying an amusement park Ferris

wheel or merry-go-round would not give us a device large enough.

So we had upped the scale even further.

We had already seen a hint of this: that downburst that hit Las Vegas with a largescale sandstorm. The changes in pressure that occurred in the desert created a localized downpour that rapidly lowered the temperature and destabilized the atmosphere.

That had been nothing more than a chaotic mass of wind.

But what if three phenomena like that wrapped together?

Wouldn't that create the world's largest centrifuge which could supply massive rotational movement? In other words, an artificial hurricane that covered the entirety of Las Vegas?

"Maxwell! We're counting on your calculations here. You've made full predictive calculations of the desired disaster, right? Use the current temperature, humidity, wind direction, pressure layout, amount of sunlight, and so on to give us the proper timing, amount of water, and distribution area!!"

"Sure. Please release the water at each location upon my request."

It was the same as a wildfire or avalanche. Being able to quantify it meant a lot.

"Class Rep, Ayumi! Do it!!"

"Understood, Satori-kun. …An artificial disaster, hm? This is more of an act of god than anything the Archenemies do."

"Fuguu!! I'm all fired up!!"

This was likely the best possible way of supplying a powerful centrifugal force. If the gels were hiding all across Las Vegas, we

just had to stir up the entire area of desert where Las Vegas was.

9.5 Gs? The limits of a fighter jet? Who cares? I'll make sure you spit back up everything you ate.

"Anastasia, us too. Turn the valve and launch one hell of a firework!!"

"Ha ha! See, Truth!? You're not cut out to be some gloomy indoor hacker!!"

We spoke as we covered our hands with towels to remove the square cover and turn the round metal valve together.

A pillar of water erupted like a geyser a short distance away. It was the size of a small building.

"Satori-kun, things are going well here," reported the Class Rep.

"No problems here either," added Ayumi. "The ultimate waste of water is continuing."

Anastasia and I, the Class Rep, and Ayumi stood at the corners of an equilateral triangle with 100km sides. Our goal was to produce downbursts from the rapid pressure change and then have their vectors combine as they swirled around. We would hit the gels with a fierce artificial hurricane that covered all of Las Vegas and surpassed Category 5 with wind speeds of more than 90m/s.

Normally, this would not be something to do while in the process of figuring it out. You would never even trigger the hurricane in the first place. Downbursts alone were hard enough to produce, so fusing several of them into a historically large spiral would be an unprecedented meteorological phenomenon.

But we had Maxwell, the ultimate specialist, with us.

We could have no greater persuasive power for this absurd idea.

“It’s said hackers gained physical weapons with the advent of IoT appliances and self-driving cars, but that isn’t accurate,” said Anastasia as she looked up at the pillar of water. “Truth. You’re showing the world you can create a power greater than even the military. Once people learn how far you can go if you make a deal with the devil known as a simulator, it will change the way people think. Absolute Noah did some awful things out of their fear of some Calamity. But, Truth, you’re reaching for the reins of the sort of calamity that made Absolute Noah run away scared.”

“…But is that really a good thing?”

“I don’t know. It might not just be calamities that Maxwell has control of. There might be some greater possibility there. But if things take a wrong turn, then a hacker of justice will put a stop to it.”

I patted my friend’s head without thinking. I really was blessed.

Then the change arrived.

At some point, the sky had changed from a clear blue to a gloomy gray.

And just as a somewhat warm wind struck my cheek…

“Wah!?”

“Wow…it’s really happening. Truth! Get back in the car before the sandstorm arrives!!”

The wind felt like a solid blow.

The moisture in the damp air must have gathered together because large raindrops hit me from the side.

“What? It isn’t turning into a sandstorm this time?”

“Because of the rain. The sand gets caught in it and can’t spread out like a curtain. Maxwell! Is this rain a problem? It’s getting the moisture outside of the designated region!!”

“No. This is the expected outcome. This storm will cool the scorching desert and create a new pressure disturbance. Then it repeats and grows in scale via the snowball effect.”

So the storm would invite a bigger storm.

It was exciting, but it was also completely beyond our control at this point. Anastasia and I hurried back into the off-road car.

Since thick clouds were now blocking the sun, Erika’s energy had returned. She was pressing her palms against the window and shouting excitedly with each lightning strike. Just like a small child happy about a typhoon.

“Maxwell, we can’t just sit around. This is powerful enough to blow away a gas station!”

“Onii-chan, go collect the Class Rep first! She’s just a human!!”

“But Ayumi-chan,” cut in the Class Rep. “You’re only in middle school!”

“Fuguu!?”

Even now, the Class Rep was indomitable. That was why she was always saving me.

“Maxwell, the Class Rep comes first. Ayumi! Check around the gas station for anywhere underground you can hide!! A zombie like you will be all right, won’t you!?”

“Wait, Satori-kun!?”

“Will do! Heh heh. I’ll take that as a sign of your trust!!”

We had to get moving, so we left the driving to Maxwell and raced down the runway-like road a well past the speed limit.

“What, we’re only going 130kph? Surely you can go faster than that. There’s lots more room on the meter.”

“No. This is miles per hour, so multiply that number by approximately 1.6. The standard Japanese car could never reach these speeds.”

“Wow!” said Anastasia. “The car is sliding to the side. This wind is incredible!!”

“Maxwell, is this still not a hurricane?”

“No. It is simply a downburst. This is only getting started.”

Nevertheless, the cascade of rain hitting the windshield made it nigh impossible to see even with the wipers on at full speed. Without a self-driving car that used radar, who knows how many times we would have driven off the road and flipped over.

A felled tree blew across the road ahead of us, a rusty metal drum rolled by like a balled-up tissue, and a large motorcycle with its wheels stolen was dragged along. There was no guarantee even our car would remain on the ground forever.

The scenery had entirely changed by the time we arrived at the gas station where the Class Rep waited. The dry desert was nowhere to be seen and the land just off of the road had become a brown river.

“…”

And the Class Rep had her hands on her hips and a sulking look on her face. Why? Because she was a Class Rep.

I opened the back door.

“I’ll apologize all you want later, so get in! We need to get to Ayumi right away!!”

“Fine, but if Ayumi-chan gets hurt because of this, I’m not listening to a word you say.”

The wind kept growing stronger. I pulled the Class Rep inside and the off-road car took off. At that very moment, the roof-covered work space was torn apart by the powerful winds. Metal pillars thicker around than my torso fell nearby.

“The storm has finally started to rotate.”

My cozy, gentle, and deep-down sadistic older sister sounded cheerful. But she was right. We were now being pursued by the leaden storm. Not even Ayumi would be able to remain standing in this. Zombies apparently had ten times the strength of a human, but that meant she was helpless against a storm capable of blowing away more than ten people at once.

“Maxwell, we’re counting on you!”

“Sure. That command gives me nothing to work with, but I can surmise the intention behind it.”

A boulder the size of the car was pulled from the ground and rolled along. Lightning kept striking nearby, so the Class Rep screamed and held Anastasia like a stuffed animal.

“Keh keh. Jealous, Truth?”

“Yes, so swap places with me!”

“…I don’t like how readily you admitted that, so I’m keeping this spot for myself.”

The off-road car was slipping to the side even worse than before. It really was a mystery how much longer it could keep driving.

“User. The three downbursts have combined as planned. The storm is Category 5+ with a top instantaneous wind speed of 120m/s. The vectors have combined, creating a clockwise hurricane that should not exist in the Northern Hemisphere. This should spin around all of the gels in the city.”

“But we can’t exactly celebrate that right now, dammit!!”

The road was covered in water now too. The car forcibly split the thick puddle as it drove. We might have been stuck if it was not positioned so high for off-road use.

…Was Ayumi all right? Hopefully, the gas station had had a tornado shelter or partially underground storeroom, but she had likely checked on that before saying we should pick up the Class Rep first.

“Ah, there it is, Truth!”

“The building is still in one piece.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. That meant Ayumi was probably fine. I wanted to pick her up and get out of here.

“No. Some information has arrived from a civilian meteorologist’s website.”

“What does it say, Maxwell?”

“All of the gas stations in the area have flooded. If Miss Ayumi evacuated underground, it may have had the opposite effect.”

“Goddammit!!!!!!”

We took the car as far as it would go. That meant 30m from the gas station. We couldn’t even tell where the road was anymore. The gas station was just as badly flooded. I thanked Maxwell after he gave up on getting closer and then I opened the back door.

A gust of wind struck my face and I thought the car was going to flip over. Erika and the Class Rep supported my back.

“Anastasia, stay in the car. This wind and rain will reopen your wound!”

“Ah, hey, wait, Truth!?”

I tried it once more. I somehow managed to get out of the car, but I could barely stand. It felt like being crammed into a packed train and being shaken by the train’s movements without anything to grab onto. Without anything to support me, I somehow managed to trudge toward the flooded gas station.

…I wasn’t going to let something like this take a precious family member from me. I wasn’t going to let my little sister lose her life in an artificial disaster I had created.

“Wait for me, dammit…”

The gas station’s large roof was torn away as I watched. The windows of the unmanned store full of vending machines were shattered and shards of glass flew toward me.

“Warning: Get down!!”

I didn’t have time for that. I held up my arms to protect my face and I felt searing pain race through them and my cheeks, but I couldn’t worry about that. I clenched my teeth and continued on toward the gas station.

Ayumi was not as sturdy as she might sound.

Unlike vampires, zombies could not regenerate from their wounds. They didn't die, but the wounds remained. If she was submerged, she would suffocate and she was weak to rotting. If she soaked in this dirty and muddy water for long, it would not end well.

"Ayumi…"

It didn't matter if she was human or undead.

This was my bratty little sister.

So I wasn't going to lose her here. It was times like this when I had to be her big brother!!

"Ayumi!!"

I kept tripping, I rolled through knee-deep water, and I nearly drowned, but I finally arrived at the station.

I could barely tell it apart from its surroundings.

Brown water was everywhere, so I couldn't tell where anything was. Was there really an entrance leading underground!?

…I had to find it.

I initially tried feeling around with my feet, but that wasn't very useful. I ended up crawling through the muddy water and feeling around with my hands.

Where was she?

Where was Ayumi!?

"…?"

Just when I thought it was hopeless, I spotted something.

The water was flowing weirdly.

There was one spot where a small whirlpool had formed. Almost like bathwater flowing down the drain…

Did that lead underground?

“Are you there, Ayumi!!!???”

I quickly ran over and stuck my hands in the water. My fingertips caught on something. It was a trapdoor like for under-the-floor storage in the kitchen. But it wouldn’t open no matter how hard I pulled up on it. I initially thought it might be locked, but then a more likely reason came to mind.

“The water pressure!?”

In a flood situation, just a few centimeters of water could keep a door solidly shut. And this was a trapdoor with knee-deep rapids sealing it. Human strength just wasn’t enough!

“Maxwell, this means there’s air inside, right? Would it be better to leave it closed!?”

“No. Even a small leak will leave the environment unsanitary and accelerate Miss Ayumi’s rotting. Also, the psychological effect cannot be underestimated. If she is trapped in a slowly flooding space for a long period, it will leave significant damage on her psyche.”

It looked like I really did have to find a way to open it.

I looked around and grabbed a power cable that had been bundled up in a metal drum.

I tied the cable around the trapdoor's handle.

"Maxwell, simulate the wind direction for me."

"Sure. But what exactly are you trying to do?"

"If a puny human can't do it, I'll just have this act of god do it for me."

The gas station's roof had been blown off, but a few pillars remained. I tied the power cable to one of those and made sure it was taut.

"Warning: A 98m/s wind is blowing in from the southeast."

"Perfect!"

I got as far away from the pillar as I could and dove into the floodwater.

Just then, an extra-large gust of wind blew through and tore the metal pillar from its base. That pulled on the attached power cable.

The water pressure didn't matter.

With a muffled sound, the trapdoor itself flew through the air. It seemed the hinges had been torn off. If that had hit me, it probably would have taken off my head.

"Ayumi."

Water flowed in from all directions.

Had I done the right thing? Or had I just made it even worse!?

"Answer me, Ayumi!!"

I pulled up a metal rod that was sticking up from the ground. It was likely the pole used for the sign of prices. It was a little thicker than a clothesline pole and I stuck it into the flowing water. I continued shouting her name while moving that pipe all around.

I felt…no response.

There was no sign of anyone there!?

“You’re kidding…right? Ayumi! Hey, Ayumi!!”

I yelled, but I couldn’t move.

Yes, I knew my little sister was in there, but I couldn’t bring myself to jump in. If I did, I would never be able to climb out again. I knew I would drown in just a few minutes.

That was the truth of the matter.

I understood somewhere in my heart that Ayumi was in there and she had already…

“……”

…Did I regret it?

I felt like that question rose up from the depths of my shaken mind.

Archenemies and the undead were not absolute. That was why I had felt the need to go rescue her. So why had I assumed Ayumi would be okay? That was blatantly contradictory.

What had my foolhardy decision cost me? Did I regret everything I had done here?

I…

Part 2

“I regret it.”

“I don’t regret it.”

Part 3

I made my decision while soaking in the floodwater and being pelted by rain.

“Like I would…”

I released more words from my mouth.

It was like a ritual meant to challenge the entire world.

“Like I would regret that…!!”

Had I done anything wrong up to this point? I had wanted to save Anastasia from the gels. I had wanted to get her out of there along with the Class Rep. I had wanted to find Erika and Ayumi who had gone incommunicado. I had wanted to protect the world’s Archenemies from the conspiracy of the Nevada airbase using the gels and bombing. I had wanted to get back at the VIPs who had fled to Absolute Noah 04. I had wanted to drag Las Vegas’s people out of the gels before they were truly lost.

What was wrong about any of that?

Why did I have to hold back on any of it!?

“So I won’t let this ruin it all in the very end. I won’t give up. No matter what! I’ll find you and we’ll all escape this nightmare together!!!!!!”

No matter how hopeless it was, I kept sticking the metal pipe into the rushing water and feeling around for anything. The floodwater and rain sapped my body heat and my movements grew stiff, but that didn’t matter anymore.

I would save her.

I would save Ayumi.

I would save my little sister no matter what!!

She couldn’t climb the stairs through that current.

But then the end of the pipe caught on something.

It was a very light sensation.

It was like finding a speck of gold at the bottom of a river.

“Ayumi?”

There was no response, but I had to trust in this.

“Listen, don’t let go, Ayumi!!”

I was fully focused.

I grabbed the metal pipe and pulled back like this was a game of tug-of-war. I kept pulling and pulling. I could feel a weight. I was worn out and exhausted, but that weight was all I had to rely on.

I pretty much collapsed backwards in the end.

And then a familiar face rose up from the whirlpool in the brown floodwater.

“Pwah!?”

That face started to sink down again, so I shot to my feet and pulled that figure up before the current could drag her back down.

It was Ayumi.

My little sister was held tightly in my arms.

My smartphone vibrated as it gave a warning.

“No. This is not over yet, user. The entire gas station has been damaged and a rainbow-colored film of oil is spreading across the floodwater. This is a very dangerous situation.”

“Goddammit, if it’s not one thing, it’s another!!”

I pulled on Ayumi’s arm as she continued to cough and then we ran away from the destroyed gas station even as the wind pummeled us and the flowing water threatened to knock our feet out from under us. It may have looked like an awkward *bon* dance, but it was the best we could do.

It happened just as we managed to leave the gas station’s grounds.

I have no idea what the direct cause was.

But there was a massive explosion behind us and Ayumi and I were knocked face-first into the floodwater.

I think I hit my nose and my entire spine had to have been straining.

But when we lifted our heads from the brown water, we could only laugh.

“Ha…ha ha.”

“Heh heh.”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!! We survived! We actually survived!!”

“Onii-chan, how can you say that after just about killing yourself with your own hurricane!? Ah ha ha!!”

We sat in the muddy water and laughed our asses off while watching the gas station burn.

“Maxwell, how’s the hurricane doing?”

“Sure. It is progressing well. It has arrived at Las Vegas. According to a civilian meteorologist’s site, several gels have been caught in it and are being torn apart as they are spun around. This has proven effective. People are indeed being removed. The buildings have been destroyed down to the underground levels, so there should not be any inside that are unaffected.”

…Good. But then what happened to the Mephistopheles supercomputer located somewhere in Las Vegas? It might not have been saved if even the underground areas were dug up.

So I thought, but Anastasia readily revealed something over my smartphone.

“Ahn? Who ever said Mephistopheles was located in Vegas? The actual machine is in my lab at that Massachusetts university. With fiber optic cables, you don’t have to worry about time lag anywhere on the earth’s surface. It’s not like I’m emailing an alien friend who lives lightyears away in space, Truth.”

“…”

I wanted to ask for my sentimentality back.

“But, Onii-chan, isn’t this useless if the people you save are eaten by the gels again?”

“They react to disturbances in the air, so they’ll probably chase after the hurricane and leave the city. And this storm will pass, so then they’ll be stuck out in the hot desert.”

“And then?”

“Maxwell. Make an anonymous report to the police of neighboring areas. Tell them the gels can be stopped by covering them in quick-dry cement powder and letting it solidify. They only eat biological

matter. We saw that baggy jumpsuit girl do it and the gels can't eat rubber or plastic. If you use their own moisture to mix in something inorganic, they shouldn't be able to move anymore. Using melted metal or glass might work too."

"Sure."

"Even if the military can't act this time, this is the tasteless country that uses small airplanes to scatter pesticides. They'll have plenty of civilian ways to drop cement powder across the desert safely from the air. They could even use UAVs or drones."

That might not actually kill them, though, so it might be best to keep them enclosed in a nuclear waste final disposal site. America would have plenty of those.

…Their lives would not be taken.

Could I really find relief in that? In a way, I was dooming them to an even worse fate.

"Ha ha."

I could regret it later. At the moment, I had other priorities.

Finally.

I sighed happily at being blessed with the chance to say something so normal to my little sister.

"Now let's get home, Ayumi."

[confidential] Cleanup [storage A51]

Since I have finished retaking control of Area 51 after that chaos, I will report using this format.

All tasks have been completed as ordered.

The solidified gel has been retrieved from Absolute Noah 04 below the Hoover Dam. Your son did not designate it a target needing saving.

The Archenemies of the Las Vegas side have all survived, but they have now experienced “extinction” by the gels. They have likely been defanged and can no longer oppose us as an organization.

And the loss or disposal of the unqualified who had disguised themselves as qualified will have left a few pillars of the world with major gaps. This will hasten the hands of the clock and bring us closer to the Calamity’s time limit.

The treatment of your daughters and son – Erika, Satori, and Ayumi – will likely be as you have described.

Personally, I sometimes find it hard to tell if you are trying to avoid disaster or are actively working to bring disaster. Not that I expect an answer from someone said to have been Adam’s first wife.

Nese Orlando

AKA Archenemy Banshee

Chapter 10

I felt like I was half-dead as I returned to Japan. I didn't want to go on another overseas trip for a long while. I just wanted to stay home.

"Oh, Satori-kun? But Transylvania is a wonderful place. I'd love to show you around."

"Not a chance. I'd definitely end up seeing the resurrection of something-or-other that had been sleeping for a millennium!!"

By the way, my suitcase and personal items were left in the ruins of the hotel. They would have been destroyed after the windows shattered and the double-punch of a sandstorm and hurricane hit them, though. It probably meant a lot that the gels ate biological matter and that Las Vegas had been destroyed before anyone could think of using the chaos to steal things.

Nonexistent Archenemies.

Immortal weapons modified by human hands.

That was a horrific invention since they had destroyed a world-famous city containing more than 2 million Archenemies in a single night.

"We'll need to keep an eye on the online movements for a while. But just leave that to your hacker of justice."

That was what Anastasia had told me at the airport.

"It looks like we'll have to abandon Vegas. After this much

attention, we can't continue our financial strategy using Mephistopheles. Well, there are plenty of other world-famous casino cities. I wonder where the gamblers will go now that Vegas is gone. It can be Macau or Monaco or wherever else, but we aren't going to give up."

She had received a pretty bad injury, but she was an Archenemy maid. There didn't seem to be any lasting effects, which was a relief.

And now.

However the time difference worked out, it was late at night when we got home. And in a way, that was where I encountered the biggest barrier of all.

"Mom."

"Oh, Satori, why not get some rest? You have to be feeling jetlagged."

Amatsu Yurina.

Archenemy Lilith.

She was an important figure on the Absolute Noah side and she was most likely the one who had manipulated Area 51 and the US Congress to do such devastating damage to Las Vegas with the gels and bombers.

She was filling up the dishwasher like normal, but I could not allow this to remain normal.

"We need to talk."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow? You seem tired and, once I finish with the dishes, I need to take a bath and then work on the

household finances.”

With a high-pitched noise, a plate shattered inside the IoT dishwasher my stepmom was using.

I remained expressionless (meaning I was working hard to not allow any emotion to the surface) as I softly repeated myself.

“We need to talk. Now.”

“Sigh… I only let you have that toy because I wanted to respect my son’s freedom and intellectual curiosity.”

On her suggestion, we moved to the dining room table.

I did not make any attempt to sit down and she sat directly on the table while elegantly giving off a lovely charm.

“So what do we need to talk about? If you’re feeling homesick, I suppose we could spend the night together.”

“This isn’t over yet.”

“What isn’t?”

“The collapse of Area 51 and the US Senate! Turn on the TV and it’s all news about them resigning due to their health!! But there’s no way that’s all it is. Mom, did you really think you could hide it like this!?”

“Hey, Satori.”

My stepmom chuckled and licked her lips a bit. Almost like a snake.

“It is true I acted on Absolute Noah’s behalf and worked to destroy Las Vegas to our own ends. But who was it that did the actual damage?”

“…”

“Only the rotten VIPs who fled to Absolute Noah 04, right? The people of Las Vegas were temporarily eaten by the gels, but they were all spat out again and the gels themselves have apparently been safely ‘secured’.”

The words flowed smoothly from her lips.

Almost like it was a prepared script.

“Hey, Satori. This incident was not actually limited to Absolute Noah 04.”

“What?”

“Absolute Noahs 01 through 14 are spread out across the 5 continents and self-proclaimed VIPs rushed to them all. This incident was in Las Vegas, but it happened in Asia and Australia as well. …That’s how ugly they are. Yet we can’t ignore their power. If they weren’t rooted out here, they would have survived to the next age. And that would be devastating.”

I had met *them* at the Hoover Dam. They were undoubtedly nothing but trash. Any group would be rotten to the core with them in the lead.

“This was no more than infighting. No, it was a filter.” Amatsu Yurina laughed. “So we aren’t going to take any more lives. Take Herbal Science for example. They tried to harm my precious daughters, but all I did was destroy their main building and drive them to bankruptcy; I didn’t kill them. How can you complain about that?”

“But, mom, you were never planning to save the people of Las Vegas after the gels got them, were you?”

“I left that with you. Even if you hadn’t suggested it, Maxwell is a disaster environment simulator, right? The idea would have reached you one way or another. There was no need for me to do anything.”

“…”

“I don’t like people saying I’m giving you all an unfair advantage. You, Erika, and Ayumi proved here that you can help Absolute Noah. You proved your worth, so no one can oppose your priority seating. This will shut up the people insisting you do even more for us.”

She was in control of everything. Even my way of getting back at her had been planned. There was no way to escape that beautiful demon. If I just gave up and let it play out, I would likely survive the Calamity and live happily ever after.

But.

However.

“You went too far, mom.”

Silence followed.

Amatsu Yurina clearly stopped moving as she sat on the table with her slender legs hanging down.

I was scared.

I felt like I had touched something I shouldn’t have. I knew family bonds were not guaranteed to remain intact no matter what. I knew they were maintained by small bits of effort that we weren’t even aware of. But I gathered my courage and continued.

I couldn’t just overlook this.

If I did that, the idea of family would fall apart!!

“You didn’t let anyone die but the black-hearted traitors? Las Vegas’s people are safe and this didn’t harm anyone? Are you kidding me, mom!? 4 million humans and Archenemies were caught in the middle of this! A ton of people have lost their homes and their city!! A rescue helicopter from out of town crashed there! Anastasia had a piece of rebar through her gut and Ayumi nearly drowned!! And you say that did no harm? How can I accept that?!”

“Satori, please listen.”

“No, it’s my turn to talk! I’m not letting you weasel out of this with suggestive words. You left Las Vegas to us? To convince Absolute Noah to take us onboard? That only works if we succeeded!! If we had failed, 4 million people would’ve been digested by the gels. Including, Anastasia, the Class Rep, Erika, and Ayumi! It would’ve been everyone!!”

“Satori…”

“And I know you’re telling me to do this with 7 billion people. And not in a simulator; in reality!! Is this really that fun!? Is it really that great to turn your back and look down on people!!!???”

I realized my stepmom had shut her mouth.

Her hand had wandered through the air and had nowhere to go. She bit her lip and I saw emotional shock and confusion in her eyes.

What had I wanted to do here?

Had I wanted to play the hero so I could see a family member looking like this?

“…I’ve reached the edge of the Calamity.”

But I didn’t stop.

I couldn’t contain the feelings burning deep in my gut.

What was I supposed to do?

Couldn’t someone tell me!? What was the right thing to do!?

“Who cares about Absolute Noah!? What does being chosen matter!? If you’re doing all this because you’re afraid of the Calamity, then I’ll grab that Calamity and drag it around myself. Just like with that hurricane, I’ll do the same thing with a wildfire, an avalanche, or a supernatural Archenemy if I have to! Once I quantify a way to control the Calamity, there will be nothing to fear. And then we’ll all laugh at you for what you are: a bunch of cowards who kept preparing for a Calamity that never came!!”

I couldn’t look her in the eye.

I left my stepmom in the dining room and ran from the house.

I couldn’t stop the tears as I ran aimlessly through the night.

That wasn’t what I had wanted to say.

I hadn’t wanted to see that hurt look on her face. I really hadn’t.

I had just wanted her to apologize.

I had just wanted her to accept her mistake, apologize, and say she wouldn’t do it again! I had wanted it to all go back to normal!! I had wanted to say good morning like normal, laugh together, and eat breakfast together like we had not long before!! That was all. That was all I had wanted!!

Memories of the past rose to the forefront of my mind.

I remembered that unbearable conflict between adults, which had felt like a small war fought in a house that should have been safer than anywhere. This was the same. I hadn't changed at all. It didn't matter who was right and who was wrong here. I couldn't control my own emotions and I had just lashed out at her to fill the hole in my heart! I had attacked my own family!! And I had gotten carried away because I knew she couldn't say anything in return!! Could I have been that bold right from the beginning? No, I had only managed that after seeing the look on her face!!

"Ahhhh!!
Ahhhh

But reality turned out to be even more complex and unpredictable than I had thought.

“Are you okay?”

I heard the soft voice of a young woman.

That was when I realized I had screwed up. If a minor in casual clothes was running around this late at night, of course the police would be called. They might think I had been drinking or taking some weird kind of dried plant. And who was it that would come to get me? My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, of course.

But my expectations were betrayed yet again.

The female voice continued.

“Satori-chan, you look awful. What happened?”

Satori-chan?

This was someone who knew my name?

While leaning up against the building wall, I hesitantly moved my head to turn around.

I knew the answer.

I really did.

There was only one person who called me Satori-chan. Even my childhood friend, the Class Rep, had always called me Satori-kun. She had never called me that.

It was only the person whose time with me had been cut short.

Someone who had once felt this same pain dozens or even

hundreds of times greater.

The person standing there was a human yet had once wielded a monstrosity that combined triple chainsaws with a large crossbow and she had fought on at least equal footing with Archenemy Lilith.

It was my true…

"…Mom…?"

Afterword

That was Volume 4 of My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

With Academy City, the mobile maintenance battalion, the Intellectual Village, and Toy Dream 35, I seem to search for romance in the cities(?) I create. When I see cities in unlikely places — like Las Vegas in the middle of the desert, Venice on the sea, or Japan's Gunkanjima — I can just feel them tugging at my soul. I also love giant aircraft carriers and offshore oil fields.

So what is an American style of fear? I also focused on this boundary of horror between the East and the West when I was writing the Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village, but I focused on Western horror this time with the Nevada airbase, a mysterious lifeform recovered from Antarctica, and responding to insufficient firepower not by running away but by upping the scale and performing an aerial bombing.

Before, the battles were constrained to a simulator or a designated ring, but this was a true pandemic occurring in a real city. I think that was a major hurdle for this series to overcome.

Satori was so detached when it was virtual, but how much would he flee in terror in a real, unrestricted battle? How would he handle an Archenemy that did so much damage? I hope you enjoyed seeing those differences.

As for the guest heroine, Anastasia, a tiny genius girl who skipped

to college is a difficult character to put in a Japanese school. All she needs to be perfect is an IQ of 180 and a mysterious PhD.

She is a Silky, a housekeeper fairy who wears all silk, but as you might guess from how she was called a Western Zashiki Warashi, that was some material I had placed in reserve thinking I could use it in Intellectual Village somewhere. (Unlike a Zashiki Warashi, the original Silky was a grown woman who would look good in a silk dress, but I made her very tiny instead. As a contrast to the sexy Zashiki Warashi, you see.)

My research suggests they're more aggressive and selfish than a Zashiki Warashi. In the story, Anastasia was a fairly self-centered hacker girl, but I hope you can add in some extra moe by imagining her dressing as a maid because she can't fight her nature. She is also an important character as someone other than Satori who properly understands Maxwell's value.

This was a special edition that took place in America, but it included a lot of important things like continuing with Volume 1's idea of a secret the bottom of a dam and Satori finding a new approach against the Calamity using a simulator. I hope you enjoyed it both on its own and as part of the continuing series.

I give my thanks to the image illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. Even when the scale rises from a city to a country, Satori is still Satori. I think that solid core comes from the strength of the original character rough I received. Thank you very much.

And I give my thanks to the readers. This series began as an experiment in releasing something on the web from the beginning instead of digitizing something from the paper format, but it only made it this far because of all your support. Thank you very much.

And I will end this here.

Ohh, I really want to put in a bunch of maps and a glossary…

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

[confidential] Secret Line [storage A51]

Banshee-> Didn’t I tell you? You can’t convince humans with logic or efficiency.

Lilith> I knew that. Yes, I did know that. But still.

Banshee-> Was what your son said really that much of a shock?

Lilith> It was a shock. But it was also nice.

Banshee-> ?

Lilith> He said I went too far. Hee hee hee! Everyone is thinking that, but none of them will say it because they want a ticket! But he said it so easily!! Where else could I find a shock like that? Not even the head of the White House could say that while he lamented Air Force One’s specs and begged for our help, but then it happens right there in my living room!!

Banshee-> You doting parent…no, it isn’t that. I sense something more wicked here.

Lilith> What I am doing is overwhelmingly correct. But that correctness is exactly why no one has been able to make a rebuttal. Yes, not even you who I left in charge of 04.

Banshee-> Don’t expect much from me. I’m no more than a crybaby.

Lilith> Oh, but he's the same. Nevertheless, Satori scolded me. Because he trusted the sense of justice in his heart.

Banshee-> Wow.

Lilith> Eh heh heh. Even I know that my actions are merely correct and might not be worth continuing. Satori is always there to shake my heart and make me ask the important questions: Should we really be doing this? Is there no other way of reaching the same result? He provides exactly the stimulation I need to rethink thinks. What more could I ask for?

Banshee-> Hmm. You really are a demon. Even if you are a parent as well.

Lilith> Of course I am. But the path toward defeating a great demon is a good way of letting someone grow.

Banshee-> And you also have an annoying habit of training up adventurers. …But, y'know what?"

Lilith> What?

Banshee-> How about you actually be honest with yourself and let yourself cry? This is just silly.

……

Lilith> Hic, uehh…

My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister Seem to Have Gone out into the World, so What do I do…I Have Bigger Problems This Time Though

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